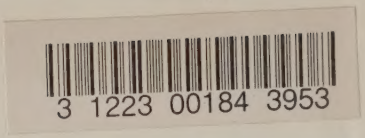
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STUDIES FROM ATTIC DRAMA

BY

EDWARD GEORGE HARMAN

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER & Co., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

1904

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OXFORD: HORACE HART
PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

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CONTENTS

THE HOUSE OF ATREUS—BEING A REPRESENTATION IN ENGLISH BLANK VERSE OF THE 'AGAMEMNON' OF AESCHYLUS . . . . *p.* 1

ALCESTIS—A PLAY, AFTER EURIPIDES *p.* 93

THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

***

BEING A REPRESENTATION,
IN ENGLISH BLANK VERSE, OF THE
'AGAMEMNON' OF AESCHYLUS

Αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ, τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω.
Tears there shall be, but let the good prevail.

AESCH. *Ag.* 124.

AD FRATREM

J. E. H.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

IN submitting to the reader the following rendering of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, the author desires o say that he has endeavoured to keep faithfully to he original throughout. But as his object has been ess to make a translation for students of the Greek a task on which others more qualified than himself ıave already laboured) than to present the substance ınd spirit of the play, so far as possible, in English 'erse, he has not hesitated to resort to paraphrase vhere literal translation seemed impracticable.

For those who are unfamiliar with the conditions ınder which the Greek play was produced, it may be tated that the occasion was a religious festival at vhich the dramatists competed, the theatre was in he open air (the theatre at Athens seating about thirty housand people), and the actors, who were men, for he female as for the male parts, wore masks and vere artificially raised by a sort of high clog or buskin.' Little reliance was, or indeed could be,

placed on stage scenery, the effect depending mainly on the lines of the poet and the voice of the actor. The features of the surrounding landscape were frequently alluded to, and, in effect, formed part of the scene.

The Chorus, which commented on the action and rendered the lyrical portions of the drama (to what extent through the leader or together is uncertain), were marshalled in the centre of the auditorium, below the stage on which the actors appeared. They sang in unison, or perhaps rather chanted, to the accompaniment of a flute or harp, and their evolutions and gestures corresponded to the movement of the ode[1].

These points are important to be borne in mind in connexion with the 'perspective' and some of the incidents of the drama. Thus the device by which Agamemnon is made to enter the palace bare-foot would no doubt tend, by contrast, to rivet attention on the figure of Agamemnon, while at the same time augmenting, in point of relative size, that of Clytaemnestra. Humiliation in a scene of apparent

[1] For fuller information see Haigh's *Attic Theatre*.

triumph is, of course, also indicated, and the impending 'sacrifice' suggested. But of the dramatic skill of Aeschylus it is unnecessary to speak at length.

Again, passages, which in a translation into a modern language may seem repulsive (as, for instance, Clytaemnestra's speech after the murder), would not necessarily be so in the original as it appeared on the stage, owing, among other things, to the sense of remoteness from ordinary life produced by the distance, by the artificial appearance and stature of the actors, and, especially, by the concealment of the human features under the fixed expression of the tragic mask. The effect produced would, by the same causes, be heightened, the appeal being more to the imagination than to the eye.

The concluding portion of the play, consisting, principally, of a choric dialogue (in which Clytaemnestra argues her case) breaking into a dirge, has been curtailed in the following rendering. It depends for its effect so largely on the form and diction of the original as to make reproduction in another language practically impossible.

Blank verse has been employed for the lyrical

portions as well as for the dialogue, as it seems to the writer that no other English metre has the requisite dignity and flexibility for the thought and that rhyme obliterates character, which in the part of the Chorus in this play is very marked.

The writer desires gratefully to acknowledge his especial indebtedness to Mr. Verrall, of whose critical edition and translation he has made frequent use throughout.

March, 1904.

ARGUMENT

THE Return of Agamemnon, with Cassandra, from Troy and the murder of both by Clytaemnestra.

The story starts from the Thyestean feast. Thyestes, brother of Atreus, King of Argos (who was the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus), having corrupted his wife and conspired against his throne, and having been banished from Argos, endeavoured to obtain his return by throwing himself upon his brother's mercy. Atreus, pretending to welcome him, made a feast, at which he served two of Thyestes' children as food to their father, who ate of it unawares. On discovering what he had done, 'with a cry he fell back vomiting' and devoted 'the whole house to 'perish in like manner,' overturning the table with his foot as a symbol of his imprecation. With his remaining child, Aegisthus, he was then sent again into banishment.

Agamemnon and Menelaus succeeded to the government of Argos, and the expedition to Troy was undertaken to avenge the abduction by Paris of Helen, wife of Menelaus. Stayed by contrary winds, Agamemnon consented to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, as a propitiation to Artemis. The revenge of Clytaemnestra, his wife, executed in company with Aegisthus, who had also a motive of revenge, supplies the basis of the action.

PERSONS REPRESENTED

A WATCHMAN.
CHORUS OF ELDERS.
CLYTAEMNESTRA.
A HERALD.
AGAMEMNON.
CASSANDRA.
AEGISTHUS.

SCENE:

Before the Palace of Agamemnon in Argos.

THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

SCENE:—The Palace Roof. Night.

A WATCHMAN.

I PRAY the gods to send me my release!
A whole long year and still I keep this watch—
Couched like a dog—this palace roof my bed—
Above my head the stars, which, night by night,
I number till I know their companies,
The greater and the lesser, where they rule,
And all the changing seasons that they bring.
And those chief signs, bright potentates of heaven,
I mark their risings and their settings down.
Drenched by the dew, unvisited by dreams,
The long night through I sentinel the flame,
Which, coming, comes not from those beaconed hills,

With news of Troy in ashes and our arms,
At last victorious, on their journey home.
And still I watch—'tis this to serve a woman,
Bringing, like her, into the things of men
The sleepless hopes which haunt a woman's heart.
Aye, if I slept, 'twould be for long indeed!

Sometimes, 'gainst drowsiness to make a shift,
I'd whistle or I'd sing—but 'twill not hold;
Tears come instead, and, thinking of this house,
I weep to think of what was once and how
'Tis served to-day. Well, well, may better days
Come in with my release—To-night? Who knows?
If through the dark the flame should leap to-night!—

The beacon fire shoots up.

O hail, thou lamp of night! O welcome fire!
Dawn of the dance, bright harbinger of song!
Welcome, thrice welcome!
Hillo, Ho!
Lady of Agamemnon, Ho! I cry,
Up from thy couch! quick up! and through these halls
Raise the loud hymn in honour of yon flame;

For Troy is taken, if we may believe
The fire-god's message which is leaping there.
Ho for the dance in Agamemnon's halls,
And I to lead it! for my fortunes wait
On my lord's coming. Oh, to think that I
Once more shall give him greeting, once again
With this hand's worship hail him home, my king!
The rest, let silence keep it; on my tongue
Such load is laid; though, could it find a voice,
This house might tell a tale. To those who know
I speak, and, if they see not, I am blind. [*Exit.*

SCENE :—*Before the Palace: night, shortly before dawn. Sacrificial fires are burning on the altars.*

Enter Chorus of Elders.

CHORUS.

Ten years have passed since, gathering to the cry
Of Menelaus and his outraged board,
The ships of Greece, with all our chivalry,
Set sail for Troy. King Agamemnon led
The speeding vengeance. Loud went up the cry,
As eagles cry when, harried of their young,

They hoarsely clamour in the eye of heaven,
Circling above their eyrie, so the wrath
Of the Atreidae chided at the throne
Of Zeus, the all-seeing lord; who, hearing, sent
His instruments of justice in those twain.
Such was his purpose, that a woman's sin,
And one man's lawless deed, should work in woe
For many a hearth and home. Oh, who shall tell
The issue thence in blood and men brought down,
In the long battle where the shivered spear
Failed the bowed knee and let the white death in?
So stands it where it is, and what shall be
Works to its end; nor yet by incense poured,
Nor prayers, shall ye make burn the sacrifice
That will not smoke to heaven.

And we who here abide and went not forth
With the great army, for that years had bowed
The strength which once was ours—if in our blood
The sap which fired our youth, in sinking down,
Drew with it all that went to make us men,
Ah, what is man[1]? His days are but a dream,

[1] This passage, which is a paraphrase, is based on the reading τί θ'

Shadows, as we, light-moved, and at the end
A poor staff's garrulous burden!
But, O Queen,
What chance has moved thee to uprouse these fires
On all our city altars? at what news
Mounts such high sacrifice and laves the air
With grace-compelling incense and the balm
Of heavenly odours from the store of kings?
Speak, Clytaemnestra! We await thy word,
To tell what this portends and raise the load
That lies about our heart, though lightened now
By the quick hope these sacrifices bring.
Hope against hope! How may we trust the end,
Fated from dark beginnings in the years
Which watched their going hence? Let Age relate—
For song is left to Age—how Calchas read
The omens by the way which came from birds,
Two eagles feeding on a tender hare,

ὑπέργηρως; favoured by Mr. Verrall. But the author does not feel certain that the sentiment is quite in the manner of Aeschylus; and that the reflection in the original is not, more probably, confined to the fact that all the fighting force was out of the country, and that the old men who were left were of no more use than the children. The passage is obscure.

Then big with young and weltering in their blood—
'Tears there shall be, but let the good prevail!'

Then spake the Seer divining—for he saw
The portent of those creatures one in fate
With the twin captains—'After length of days
They who go forth shall win to Priam's town,
With loss of all their store—only may wrath
Smite not the host from heaven ere yet they come;
For on that feast of eagles lies the wrath
Of Artemis, who loathes such deeds of blood—
Tears there shall be, but let the good prevail!'

'Yea, goddess, loving to all lowly things,
Earth-roving creatures and their tender young,
Yet art thou prayed to let these omens bring
Their fair fulfilment as they promise fair,
Though crossed with evil. But for that I call
The lord Apollo, with his healing power,
To stay the wrathful goddess that she send
No baffling winds to keep the Argive fleet
With long delay man-wasting, or bring on
A second sacrifice, with service foul
Of flesh, accursed, putting strife between

The blood and bone, with havoc of all awe
Of wife for husband, and in house and home
Sleepless, dark-plotting, child-avenging hate.'
Thus Calchas, with high promise, but a word
Of darker boding and according strain:
'Tears there shall be, but let the good prevail!'

Zeus!—whosoe'er he be, if by that name
He hears us call him—I can read these things
But as the work of Zeus. This thought alone,
Long searching, have I found to lift the load
Of vanity which lies about our life[1].
And elder powers there were, whose day was spent
When Zeus victorious reigned; and 'tis his law
That men should learn through suffering. For it bleeds,
The unstaunched wound that was, and, at its throb,
Comes memory, and so too wisdom comes.
And 'tis, perchance, a mercy from a Power
That won through strife to its majestic seat.

So he, the elder of those captains twain,
Unsearching in his heart, the easier way

[1] Τὸ *μάταν ἄχθος*—a difficult phrase. The writer has followed Mr. Verrall's translation.

Taking, though dark the utterance of the Seer,
Bent to the blast; and when he saw the host
Ravaged with famine, and the winds set still
Against his fleet, sore driven, where the tides
Rushed to and fro in Aulis, and delay
Wasting the flower of Argos, then at last,
When one more means was shown him and the Seer
Pointed to Artemis—a bitter cry
Broke from those twain, and on the ground they beat
Their sceptres, and the elder spake and said:

'Sore is my fate, sore if I disobey,
Sore in obedience if I slay my child,
The jewel of my home, and stain my hands,
A father's hands, with her young virgin blood.
What choose, where choice each way is fraught with ill?
How shall I leave my ships and fail my men,
Who clamour for the deed to stay these winds,
And who shall blame them?—Be it for the best!'

So, pleading Fate, about his neck he placed
Her harness, and his mind was changed within;
Blinded and hardened, so the end to gain

He would dare all, religion, bonds of blood,
Sacred to God and man—so sets the sin,
Gendered in frenzy, to its fateful goal—
And daring thus, he dared to slay his child.
To speed his sailing and a woman's war:
Such was the cause! A girl's young life, her cries,
Beseechings to a father, what were they?
The people would have blood to stay the storm.
The prayer was said, the slayers had the word
To bind her where she stood, a sight for tears,
And with the ruthless gag to choke the curse
Which from her lips upon the house might come
In her last utterance. Desperately doomed
They seized her, and, her fair robes flowing down,
Like a dumb thing for sacrifice they held
Her who would speak—as oft in other days
Her voice had sounded in her father's halls,
In the clear song of blessing at the board
Where men sat feasting and their hearts were glad—
Fair now and speechless, and her piteous eyes
Smote to the soul the men who worked that woe.

What followed then I saw not, nor relate;

Let silence keep it. But the prophet's word
Lacks not fulfilment, and the law stands sure
That men shall learn by suffering. Let it be,
Nor ask to know what comes. 'Tis but to weep
To-day for the to-morrow. What will come
Brings its own burden and its healing too.
The present be our care and ordering well
Things nearest—our true task—and chiefly this,
To guard from violence this ancient land.

Enter Clytaemnestra, attended.

I come, O Clytaemnestra, honouring
Thy queenly power, for meet it is that thou
Shouldst claim our homage when the throne awaits
Its absent lord, our king. But say, what news—
If news there be—bids mount these sacred fires,
In hopeful promise? This I fain would learn,
Though in the silence I am still content.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

For 'promise,' as the Night is kind, may she
Send Dawn as kindly; but to hear of 'hope'
Were all too weak a joy. Know thou then this,
The Argive host have taken Priam's town.

CHORUS.

Taken! How saidst thou? Nay, but speak again.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

I said that Troy was ours; speak I not clear?

CHORUS.

These tears will flow; 'tis joy that bids me weep.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Thine eye stands witness to thy loyalty.

CHORUS.

But what of proof? Where is the proof of this?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Proof! I have proof, and fear no guile from heaven.

CHORUS.

Speak'st thou of dreams, which come to win belief?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

The fancies of a sleep-bound soul I heed not.

CHORUS.

Or rumour, borne not on the wings of sleep?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

What! Am I chid and made a child in this?

CHORUS.

But since what time? when was the city taken?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

This very night which now brings forth the day.

CHORUS.

And who thus soon could come to tell the tale?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

'Hephaistos[1],' a bright beam from Ida sending,
Posted the message over land and sea;
Ida to Lemnos, Lemnos to the peak
Of lonely Athos gave the signal flame;
Thence, like a sun gold-glorious o'er the sea,
The watchman sent it flaming to the heights
Of far Macistus, which delaying not,
Nor caught by slumber, sent the message on.
Afar that beacon o'er Euripus' streams,
Made signal to Messapius' sentinels,
Who gave the countersign of answering flame,
Firing of withered heath a giant pile.
Thence gathering strength, unwearied, like a moon

[1] God of fire.

Athwart Asopus' plain it roused the watch
Upon Cithaeron's crag and kindled up
Another speeder of that post of fire.
Kindled by eager hands a mightier glow
Than all before went up and shot afar
Across Gorgopis' waters to the peak
Of Aegiplanctus, where the guard, uproused,
Failed in no duty there to speed it on.
Roaring to the great void they sent it up,
A mighty beard of flame, which, o'er the gulf
Saronic and its headland leaping, came
Down to Arachne's height, and thence at last,
From yonder beacon, on this roof it lit—
A light true kindled from Idaean fire [1].
Such is the order of those courier flames,
By me prepared, and in their course fulfilled.
And in that race the first and last still win.
This is the proof and warrant that I give thee
Of tidings sent me by my lord from Troy [2].

[1] *Φάος τόδ' οὐκ ἄπαπτον Ἰδαίου πυρός.* An incidental reference, perhaps, by Aeschylus to his own poetry and the inspiration he drew from Homer.

[2] This description of the beacons, together with the return of the army on the morning after the taking of Troy, presents certain

CHORUS.

Now to the gods shall thanks ascend for this.
But, ere that be, this tale again unfold,
So welcome falls its message on mine ear.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

This very day is Troy in Argive hands.
Methinks I hear their shouts, victorious cries,
With groans that blend not well. So pour me forth
In the same vessel vinegar and oil,
Thou wilt not say they mingle lovingly.
Prone on the ground, their arms about the dead,
Free now no longer, these with wail lament

difficulties in the construction of the play (see Mr. Verrall's edition). It seems, however, to the writer that such a compression is necessitated by the exigencies of the stage, if the pageant of events, of which the play is composed, was to be presented, and that Aeschylus trusted to the imagination of the audience, aided by the vividness of his own descriptions, to bridge over, as it were, anything which may have been lacking in probability. Compare Shakespeare, in the 'Chorus' to *Henry V*:

'Carry them here and there, jumping o'er times.'

Husbands and brothers; children too their sires.
Those, spent with the night's work, in hungry bands,
Wander the city through, and take at will
Lodgement and provender in Trojan homes;
No guard to mount, poor wretches, they will sleep
Soundly to-night, and think themselves well stowed,
Beneath a roof, from frost and dews of heaven.
And if they reverence well the city's gods,
And spare the sacred places, they may come
Scathless away, captors uncaptured still.
But, ere that be, let no unrighteous greed
Fall on the host, to seize forbidden things.
Half of the course is run, and there remains
The journey homewards and a safe return.
And, e'en though blameless from the gods they come,
Yet there is still the anger of the dead,
Which watches from the grave. Evil may come,
Where yet no evil shows and all seems well.
These words from me, a woman, hast thou heard.
But let the good in all men's eyes prevail;
This, of all blessings, is the joy I choose.

CHORUS.

Lady, thou speakest as a man may speak,
Whose words are matched with wisdom. To the gods
I now will render thanks, for I have heard
The proofs thou givest. And, indeed, the end
Brings no unworthy guerdon for our toils.

[*Exit Clytaemnestra.*]

Hail, lord of heaven, O Zeus! hail, kindly Night!
Night of renown, upbuilder of our fame!
Who o'er the towers of Ilium hast cast
A net of doom, which neither old nor young
May overleap—one ruin holds them all.
Lord of the hearth and guest, I praise thee now;
For not in vain thy bow was bent, nor vain
Thy shaft was sped 'gainst him who wrought these ills.
The blow has fallen and they know it thine.

'Twas said by one the gods regarded not
Mortals or those who trample under foot
Things sacred, but 'twas impiously said.

For wealth breeds violence, when over-much
A house with pride of substance is increased,
Beyond the mean, where rests true happiness
For those in wisdom found. But whoso trusts
In wealth to save him, when those hidden springs
Of action in the light he shunned appear,
And his account is taken, oh, how poor
The reckoning then! like metal at the touch,
He shows his nature and the thing he is.
Justice, 'twas not for him—the flying bird
A boy will follow—yet he thought to spurn
Her ancient landmarks and to make his will
The measure of all law, and so his mark,
Set on his people, is the sin of all.
And when at last he turns to heaven in prayer,
The gods, who judge injustice, seal his doom.

And such was Paris; he who, to the halls
Of Atreus coming, shamed the friendly board
By theft adulterous. And she who went,
Leaving the citizens the din of shields,
With crash of spears, and arming of the fleets,
Bringing a dower of death to Ilium,

Passed lightly through the gates and thought no sin.
Then in the palace halls, where minstrels sang,
Went up the loud lament: 'Ah, for the home!
Ah, for the home and for the lords thereof!
Ah, for the bed yet warm with her embrace!
Behold him where he stands, in speechless woe,
The bridegroom, her fair spouse, dishonoured now,
His curses mocked by silence, and his eyes
Strained after her he loved across the sea;
And that desire shall waste him, till he seem
A phantom wandering in the halls he ruled.

And marble forms are hateful and the grace
Of statues hateful to a husband's heart.
With the loved presence all delight is fled.
And if it come in visions of the night,
'Tis but to add more bitterness; in vain
Hands are outstretched to grasp it—like a dream
It fades and passes on the wings of sleep.'

Such the hearth-sorrows, and yet more besides.
For heaviness is in the homes of Greece,

Tears for the dead and things which pierce the heart.
Who left them, him they knew; what comes again
They know but as his ashes and an urn.
A trafficker in gold, the lives of men,
Is Ares, and his balance is the spear;
Out of the fires of Ilium he sends
The parcelled dust he gathers for his gains,
Hard-wrung from tears, the tears of love which weep
All that is left of what was once a man.
Then they lament him, then they praise the dead,
How one was great in battle and how one
Fell nobly daring—'For another's wife,'
Some one will mutter, and the whisper grows
Against the Atreidae. Others by the wall
Of Ilium have found a lonely grave,
In earth which, hating, hides them ever more.

'Tis no light thing, the muttering of the storm,
Which gathers from a people's discontent;
And the thought haunts me that we yet may hear
Something the night concealed, I know not what.

For heaven beholds the blood of slaughtered men,
And marks the slayer. In his steps they tread,
The dark Avengers; and, though lifted high
In fortune, if with right he be not found,
In a dark hour of changing circumstance,
They seize upon him then and hurl him down.
A fame that fills the world a man may fear;
'Tis on the peaks the heavenly thunder strikes;
Be mine a lot unenvied and to live
No conqueror, nor conquered, all my days.

The fire has spoken fair, and its report
Flies through the city; but if it be true
Who knows? 'Tis passing strange—I do misdoubt it.
Only a child, or some weak-witted thing,
Would build his hopes upon a burst of flame,
And see them quenched as soon with surer news.
But 'tis a woman's way to make her hopes
The measure of belief—too credulous,
Her bounds ill-fenced are lightly overstepped;
But soon 'tis passed, the tale that women cry.

Soon shall we know whether these courier flames,
And space-o'erleaping beacons, have true warrant,
Or whether, like a dream, they but present
A joy to cheat the mind. For lo, I see
A herald making towards us from the shore,
About his brow a wreath of olive sprays,
His wear all travel-stained, as one who comes
With weight of news hard-sped. What he shall say
Will be no smoking signal, but a word
Clear spoken, which shall either bring us joy,
Or else—but let that 'else' remain unsaid:
Fair now be added to what seems so fair.
Who for the city keeps another thought,
Caught in his error, let the loss be his!

Enter Herald.

HERALD.

Oh, hail, my native earth! O Argos, hail!
Ten years—and do I now salute thee here?
Of all the hopes which snapped through all these years,

Has this hope held? for never did I think
To find a grave in thy beloved soil.
Now hail, thou land! and hail, thou light of day!
Hail, Zeus, thou lord of all! and thou dread King,
Pythian Apollo, who hast spent thy shafts
Enough upon us by Scamander's stream,
As thou didst waste us be our saviour now!
And all the city's gods I here salute,
And Hermes, prince of heralds, and their lord,
Heroes who sent us forth, yea all I pray
To welcome back the host the spear hath spared.
Hail, halls of kings! ye roofs beloved, hail!
Hail, awful seats and deities revered,
Serene similitudes that front the dawn,
With gladness in your eyes, as now the light
Smites them with gladness, O receive our king,
After long years, in kindness, as of yore!
Dawn after night, he comes, for you and these,
Who here shall greet him, Agamemnon, lord[1].
Aye, give him greeting, as ye may to one

[1] In this address the Herald salutes the statues of the gods and the seats of judgement before the palace, with a reference to the sacred buildings, &c., on the Acropolis, which he would see from the stage.

Who, with the mattock of avenging Zeus,
Has rooted out the very town of Troy;
Gone are her sacred places, razed her shrines,
And from the earth her place and name are swept.
Such is the yoke which Atreus' elder son
Has laid upon that people, and he comes
Of all men living greatest in renown.
For neither Paris, nor the city with him,
Called to account, can boast that they have won
More than they suffered. On all counts condemned,
For theft and rapine, he has rendered up
His plunder, and in overthrow complete
Razed to the earth his own ancestral home—
A double debt, by Priam's house well paid!

CHORUS.

Herald of the Achaean armies, hail!
And welcome home in gladness.

HERALD.

I am glad,
So glad that now I would not grudge to die.

CHORUS.

Did love torment thee for thy native land?

HERALD.

So that for joy mine eyes gush out with tears.

CHORUS.

A sickness sweet is that which ye have taken.

HERALD.

How so? In plainness now this word unfold.

CHORUS.

Smit with a love not unrequited here.

HERALD.

Did the land long to see her sons again?

CHORUS.

Aye, and with tears—full many have I shed.

HERALD.

Why for the host this note of sadness now?

CHORUS.

Silence is best and let it medicine this.

HERALD.

Were some thou fearedst, then, thy lords away?

CHORUS.

Even as thou saidst—now would I gladly die.

HERALD.

We have done well—and, for the length of time,
Not fared amiss—though there were hardships, doubtless;
But who, unless a god, can hope to pass
All his allotted life without some pain?
For if I told the labours we endured,
Cabined on shipboard, sleeping hard and sore,
With want of everything for use by day—
And then on land, and there 'twas even worse,
Camped, as we were, beneath the walls of Troy,
The dews of heaven upon us, and the earth
Reeking with fevered swamps, our clothes in rags,
Rotting with damp and creatures breeding in—
And then the cold—the very birds fell dead—
Straight from the snows of Ida—and the heat
At noontide, in the summer, when the sea
Was laid out level in a windless sleep—
But why lament these things? their pain is past;
And past for some so well that they may sleep,

And take no thought to stir themselves again!
But why count o'er the dead? enough the blows
That beat about the living, griefs enough!
Well rid of risks, 'tis something—nay, 'tis well.
For us, the remnant of the Argive host,
The gain outweighs the sorrow—now henceforth
The sun shall never set upon our deeds;
Borne over land and sea, their fame shall find
This record: 'To the gods, an Argive host,
Captors of Troy at length, nailed up these spoils,
And for men's knowledge in all time to come.'
These tidings hearing, laud ye, as ye may,
The city and her generals, and give thanks
To Zeus who wrought these things. My say is said.

CHORUS.

That your words win me I will not deny.
Good news for aged hearers still keeps green.

Enter Clytaemnestra.

But for the house, and Clytaemnestra most,
These things set on, and I too have my share.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

I raised a cry of joy erewhile for this,
When in the night a messenger arrived,
A flame of fire, with tidings how that Troy
Was taken and in ruin overthrown.
And some one chid me: 'Art thou then persuaded
That Troy is sacked because a beacon burns?
How like a woman's heart to fire at this!'
With words like these I was made seem to err.
But still I sacrificed, and at my word,
Though but a woman's, all the town took up
The cry of triumph, and the sacred fires
From willing hands sent fragrance up to heaven.
And now what need that thou shouldst tell me more,
Since from the king himself the tale I'll take?
My care be now to give him welcome fit,
My lord of worship. To a woman's eyes
What gladder sight than husband home returning,
Safe from the field of battle, when his gates
Roll back to bring him in? Take thou from me
This message to my husband, that he come
Quickly, and he shall find love in his city,
A faithful wife at home, even as he left her,

A watchdog of his hearth, in all things true,
Jealous for him and hating those he hates,
Constant and steadfast, to no pleasures turning,
A heart of tempered steel, and in her hands
His honour stainless still through all these years.

CHORUS.

Such words as these, with truth to swell their flight,
Do honour to a woman nobly born.

[*Exit Clytaemnestra.*]

Thus has she spoken, and thus thou hast heard,
A message fair for fair interpreting.
But tell me, herald, for I fain would hear,
Of Menelaus, is he safely back,
And comes he with you to the land he loves?

HERALD.

Fair words I'd speak, but, if they be not true,
The joy, for friends, would not endure for long.

CHORUS.

Now might the true be wedded to that fair,
For, disunited, soon doth falsehood show.

HERALD.

The man has vanished from the Achaean host,
He and the ship he sailed in—'tis the truth.

CHORUS.

Saw you him start from Troy, or did a storm
Divide him in mid ocean from the fleet?

HERALD.

Like a skilled bowman thou hast hit the mark,
And gathered in one word a length of woe.

CHORUS.

Living or dead, does no one know his fate?
Comes there no rumour of him from the sea?

HERALD.

Nay, no one knows to tell, except the Sun,
Whose rays give nourishment o'er all the earth.

CHORUS.

But of this storm, by wrath of deities,
How came it on the fleet, and what the end?

HERALD.

To mar good news with ill, on one fair day,
Beseems not. There are gods whose worship holds
In each, due ordered, but 'tis separate still.
For when a messenger of woe comes in,

Bearing upon his face the fearful tale,
He scarce may utter, of defeat and death,
And from his lips a hapless city takes
A reeling blow, and knows her armies fallen,
Desolate homes and victims driven forth,
For sacrifice by Ares, where he plies
His iron goad, black with the blood of men,
Twin-pointed, which he loves, his weapon dread—
Laden with woes like these, he well may raise
To the dark goddesses a cry of pain.
But coming to a town filled full of joy,
For safety and success and things well done—
How shall I mix with evil such fair news,
Telling the story of the storm that smote
The Achaean host, not without wrath from heaven?
For Fire and Water, bitter things before,
Sware then together, and made good that pledge,
Whelming Achaia's hapless armament.
'Twas in the night when that sea-sorrow came.
In sudden onset from the Thracian hills
The winds fell on us, dashing ship on ship,
And, in a threshing storm of rain and surge,
Whirled them away, unshepherded and lost;

And when the sun came up, we saw the sea
Strewn with the dead, like flowers, and wreckage wide.
Us and our ship, whose hull still held, some god
Stole us away, or begged us off—who knows?
For 'twas no mortal man who took the helm.
Surely 'twas Fortune's self that came aboard,
And brought us through that sea, which brake not in,
Nor worked our death upon a rock-bound shore.
So we escaped a watery grave, and then,
In the white day, misdoubting our own fortune,
We brooded in our minds on this new loss
The host had suffered, whelmed and beaten down.
And now, of those if any still survive,
Doubtless for dead they take us, as we them.
But hope we for the best! for Menelaus
Soonest and first should come. It cannot be
That 'tis the will of Zeus his race should perish.
And if, where'er he be, the sun beholds him
Still living in the light, there is yet hope
That to his home he will return again.
This is my tale, and what thou hear'st is true.

[*Exit Herald.*]

CHORUS.

Who could have given that name? what power unseen
Guided his tongue, that she was 'Helen[1]' called?
Spear-wooed in battle, bane of ill for men,
For ships and cities, well she proved her name,
When, passing from her curtained bower, she went
Before the felon West across the sea.
And after her a mighty hunt of men,
Shield-bearing, stooped upon the vanished trail,
Path of the oar far-smitten to the strand,
Whose woods would cry the havoc of that fray.
A bride of sorrow for the sons of Troy,
By wrath pursued, which he, the god of guests,
Sent for his vengeance on the song they sang,
Their triumph of an hour. But, changing soon,
That bridal hymn became a dirge of tears
For Priam's ancient city, crying woe
On Paris, with lament through all those days
She wept the grievous slaughter of her sons.

A pest, a lion's whelp, within the house

[1] Ἑλέναν . . . ἑλέπτολις, &c., a play on words which cannot be reproduced in English.

A man did rear, a suckling, for the teat
Still yearning; in his tender days full gentle,
A joy to childhood and by age caressed.
And oft he licked the hand, and, for the need
His belly taught him, fawned with wheedling ways.
But, elder grown, the temper of his race
Showed in him, and his nurture he repaid
By ravage of the flocks, that with their blood
The house was dabbled, and who reared him knew
The pest from heaven which they had harboured there.

So would I say to Ilium's city came
A dream of wealth, a seeming-windless calm,
Dart of soft eyes, the tender wound of hearts,
A very flower of love and all delight.
But what she was the bitter blossoming
Of that ill marriage proved, a bride of woe,
By Zeus the Avenger sent, in evil hour
For Paris and the race of Priam's sons.

Lives among men an ancient word of fear,
That wealth, grown great, breeds offspring for the race
In progeny of woe. But rather say I

The unholy deed the parent is of ill,
Like breeding like, but, for the righteous home,
Fair through all time its place and name are set.

But ancient Pride, or soon or late, doth breed
A younger Pride, whose brood is Insolence
And godless Daring—curses twain that come,
With evil fraught, among the sons of men.
But Righteousness in smoky cabins shines,
And honours lives of worth; though palaces
Be gilded, yet, if hands unclean are there,
With eyes averted thence she turns to homes
Where reverence dwells, nor heeds the power of wealth
Ill-praised; and to the goal she guideth all.

Enter Agamemnon in a chariot, followed by Cassandra, also in a chariot. Soldiers, attendants, &c. In the course of Agamemnon's speech Clytaemnestra, attended by female slaves, comes out of the Palace.

Ah there, approach now, the king, the conquering lord,

Of Troja the sacker, of Atreus the son!
How shall I honour thee, with what words address
thee,
In the due mean of fitting compliment?
For, among men, ill-minded are there many,
Who semblance set above reality.
So for misfortune all will spare a tear,
But the grief's wounding bites not to the heart;
And, for success, from envious faces wrung
There lack not smiles, to give it countenance.
But the discerning shepherd of men's thoughts
Marks what the eye would cover, when it shows
The watery gleam of welcome in dissemblance
For what the true heart feels. But thou, O king—
And let the word be spoken—in that time,
Waging a war for Helen, didst appear
In lineaments ungracious to mine eyes;
Nor did I deem it well that thou shouldst give
Courage to men death-doomed by sacrifice.
But now, with kinder feelings and a heart
Warmed by thy presence, we behold thee here.
Crowned by success the labours that have been
Look dark no more. In time thou now shalt learn,

By inquest made, who of the dwellers here
Guarded the state with truth, and who with guile.

AGAMEMNON (*speaking from his chariot*).

To Argos first, and to the gods who keep
The city, be my salutation said;
They who have wrought with me for my return,
And for the rights I've wrung from Priam's town.
For in that cause, not waged with words, where we
Claimed judgement in the overthrow of Troy,
Into the bloody urn, with one accord,
They cast their votes, and that which stood beside it
Was empty found, for all that Hope came near
To cheat it at the rim[1]. And now goes up
The smoke to heaven, where that doomed city burns,
A reeking holocaust, which, heaving still,
Gasps in its ashes, ere it sinking dies.
For this 'tis meet we render to the gods
Signal thanksgiving, since the net of wrath,
We cast, has closed them in; what time the beast,
The Argive monster, brood of horse and shield,

[1] A metaphor from the two urns in a court of justice, into which the votes for the verdict were placed.

About the setting of the Pleiades,
Leapt on his prey and laid it in the dust:
Leapt as he would, a lion in his might,
O'er those proud towers, and lapped the blood of kings.
This word, in prelude, for the gods be said.
Now for thy thoughts: I know and I have heard
What thou hast told me, and I think with thee.
Few are the men, who, when a friend's success
Sets him above them, do not hate him for it.
And envy, like a poison at the heart,
Doubles, for him it takes, the grief that 's there;
Burdened with his own troubles, he laments
The other's better fortune which he sees.
I speak of what I know, for those who seemed
Most to my service bound, what were they proven?
A glass of friendship, shadows of a shade.
Only Odysseus, who against his will
Set sail, once with me, never swerved aside;
This I will say, be he alive or dead.
And for the rest, touching the things of state
And worship of the gods, we will advise us
What calls for our concern; what we find good

That it may so endure; and what grows rank,
As we are well disposed, we shall not fail
To use such means of wholesome surgery
As shall prevent the further spreading sore.
Till then, I go within, where, at my hearth,
The gods, who sent me forth, shall take my worship,
Brought safely home again. May Victory,
As she has followed me, be with me still!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Men of our city, Argive elders here,
I shame not in your presence to avow
The love I bear my husband, for with time
Maiden reluctance weareth and we speak
More freely of these things. Full well I know
The wretched life I led through all these years,
The while my lord lay under Ilium.
First for a woman, severed from her mate,
To sit at home bereft is grievous woe;
Hearing the rumours which come posting in,
One following on another, and each worse,
To fill the house with dread. And if this man
Had half the wounds received of which the tale

Came flowing to his doors, methinks a net
Had not more holes to reckon; deaths as many
Were put upon him, Geryon [1] himself
Had wanted bodies. In such sort was I
Widowed by rumours and of my own life
Brought near to make an end. And thus it is
That at my side thy son, Orestes, stands not,
As well he should, the pledge of faith between us,
To give thee welcome. Marvel not at this;
He is well cared for by our good spear-friend,
Strophius the Phocian; who, in kindly sort,
Warned me of what might come, the risk for thee
Beneath the walls of Troy, and if a move
From our home-brawlers should unhinge the state;
Adding, as so he might, that 'tis the world
Ever to trample on a fallen man.
Seek no occasion for mistrust in this.
As for myself, these tearful springs that flowed
Have spent their uses and are all dried up.
Sore are these eyes with weeping, watching late,
And longing for thy coming and the flame
Of night-conducting torches which were wont

[1] A fabled monster.

To bring thee to my bed. And when I slept,
The tiny trumpet of the gnat would shake me,
To start from dreams a cheating hour would show
Stuffed with thy sufferings. All this have I borne.
But now, these sorrows past, with a free heart
I hail my husband, watchdog of the fold,
Sure forestay of the ship, pillar deep based
That bears the soaring roof, land after storm
To mariners appearing past all hope,
A gushing spring to thirsty travellers—
Sooth, sweet it is to find escape from ills,
As these my words in honour of him show.
And may no envy mar what stands so well,
For we have borne enough! Now, dear my lord,
Step from thy car; but on the ground, O king [1],
Set not that foot which trampled Ilium.
Slave-girls, to whom this office is commanded,
Why tarry ye with coverlets to strew
The path that he shall tread? Straight let it bloom
In purple for his passage to a home
Unlooked for, even as Justice shows the way.

[1] Used emphatically in the original in order to excite prejudice with the crowd, and suggestive of Eastern tyranny.

The rest, beneath the ordaining hand of heaven,
Counsel, that sleepeth not, shall well dispose.

AGAMEMNON.

Daughter of Leda, guardian of my home,
Thy speech is like my absence, to such length
Thou hast outstretched it. But the meed of praise,
With grace to recommend it, better comes
From others. For the rest, pamper me not
With women's stuff about me; gape me forth
No earth-prostrating clamour such as cries
To Eastern kings, nor make my path a mark
For eye of envy with strewn tapestries.
Keep for the worship of the gods these things.
I, at least, hold it for a thing of fear
To go, a mortal man, on paths laid out
For sumptuous treading. As a man, I say,
Honour me, not a god. Fame cries aloud,
Without foot-stuffs to trample, and a mind
That harbours no ill thoughts is heaven's best gift.
Him only call we blessed to whom it comes
To end his days in fair prosperity.
If all is ordered so, I have no fear.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay then, saving thy judgement, tell me this.

AGAMEMNON.

My judgement holds, be sure, and weakens not.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Didst thou, in fear, make such a vow to heaven?

AGAMEMNON.

Thou hast my final word, as e'er man spake.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

What then, in such a case, had Priam done?

AGAMEMNON.

Priam? I ween on purple he had trod.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Why should thy greatness yield to carping tongues?

AGAMEMNON.

And yet the people's voice has no mean power.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Who moves no jealousy no envy wins.

AGAMEMNON.

Ah, but a woman should not love contention!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Yet there are times when power may yield with grace.

AGAMEMNON.

Thou ratest high this victory, methinks.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

'Tis naught for thee, give me my way in this.

AGAMEMNON.

Then, since thou'lt have it so, let one with speed
Loose from my feet the service of these shoes,
And as the sea-grained purple path I tread,
May no god look from far with envious eye.
I should take shame indeed, with tramplings rude,
To mar this web and waste what wealth has bought.
Of this, then, thus. This stranger damsel now
Friendly bestow. Zeus with propitious eye
Looks upon those who gently use their power;
For none bears willingly the captive's yoke.
But she, the chosen flower of all we took,
Fair present from the host, followed me here—

And so, since thou constrainest me in this,
Treading on purple, to my halls I pass.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

There is a sea—and who shall drain it dry?—
That breeds good store of purple, oozing fresh
For dye of vestments, and this house, O king,
Lacks not of these and knows no poverty.
Trampling of many garments had I vowed,
In ransom of thy life, if by such means
The oracles I sought had shown the way.
For while the root lives on, the branches spread,
For shadow when the sultry dog-star reigns.
So now, returning to thy hearth and home,
As warmth in winter does thy presence show;
And, when the vintage in the halls is pressed,
'Tis a fresh coolness when the lord is there.

Agamemnon enters the Palace.

Zeus, O Zeus!
Who crownest all, now crown but my desires;
All else accomplish as it be thy will!

Clytaemnestra follows into the Palace.

CHORUS.

Why at the portals of my boding heart
Flutters this sign of that which works within[1],
Unasked, in oracles still bodying forth
These presages of fear? Why among dreams,
Such as unmeaning pass, assurance strong
Disowns not these? About the anchor stones
The sand has gathered since upon the shore
Were flung the cables of the fleet that went
To Ilium's strand, and of their safe return
Mine eyes are witness here, and yet the strain
Hymns in my heart of the Erinys now.
With fair assurance gone my hopes depart;
My heart is darkly stirred, a climbing dread
Comes on wild, eddying streams, which, beating up,
Surge at my breast, and in my mind sets in
A knowledge like a tide it may not turn.
Yet still I pray that false the prophet strain
May fall, and in fulfilment come not so.

[1] Mr. Verrall, who reads δεῖγμα, supposes that the metaphor is from a sign (something fluttering) which a professional diviner may have used before the door. This answers well to the general sense.

Lo now prosperity; a health flushed high,
It owns no limits; yet disease is there,
Its neighbour to the wall close pressing still.
And many a man has headed to his fate,
Holding his course to where the hidden reef
Takes the ship down. Yet Fear, his bales outflinging,
Has saved a house from overweight of ills,
That yet had foundered. Still with bounteous hand
Zeus doth provide, and from the furrowed field
Sendeth his increase for the times of dearth.

But a man's blood upon the dark earth shed,
Who may restore him? By what charm or spell
Comes back the life? Nay, not for those to heaven
Most dear would Fate, for all their piety,
Yield to our prayers to raise them up again.

Dark at my heart these thoughts of boding still
Throng to the utterance, and, if Fate's decrees,
Upon the skein of purpose intertwined,
Flowed vocal off, the burden it should bear
My tongue had poured. By now, in hopeless wise,

Mutters the labouring thought; an underworld
Flames in my heart cloud-weighted, and a fear,
Wide-eyed for what may come, is watching still [1].

Enter Clytaemnestra coming out of the Palace.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Get thee in too, Cassandra, thee I say;
Since, not in wrath, hath Zeus ordained that thou
Shouldst share our stead and store, and in our halls
Stand at his altar in the throng of slaves.
Step from that chariot down and leave disdain.
Even Alcmena's son, as we are told,
Was sold a slave and bore the captive's yoke.
But, if such fate be thine, be thankful then
To find a home with lords of ancient wealth.
Gleaners of wealth they never thought to win,
These, without rule, in roughness use their slaves.
Thou hast from us what custom ordereth.

[1] The last lines are a paraphrase. The end of the chorus takes up the idea of the beginning, in which the heart of the speaker is conceived as the priestess of an oracular shrine, who is sitting in a dark cavern, agitated, as it were, by cross-currents of inspiration, and unable to decide which decree of fate she is intended to utter.

CHORUS.

She speaks to thee—a plain word for thy hearing;
And, as thou'rt taken in the toils of Fate,
Thou'lt yield, an so thou wilt—haply thou wilt not.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Nay, an she be not, swallow-like, possessed
Of some unknown, barbaric tongue, my words
Must reach her mind and move her to compliance.

CHORUS.

Follow her; for thy need her words are best—
Nay, be persuaded, leave this chariot seat.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

I have no leisure, look thou, at these doors
To tarry, for beside the hearth within
The beasts stand ready for the slaying fires—
A joy we dared not hope for; and if thou
Wilt have thy part in this, make no delay.
But if thou understand'st not as I speak,
With thy strange hand, instead of voice, reply.

CHORUS.

A clear interpreter she seems to need;
Wild is her look, and like a beast new-taken.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Aye, mad she is, and listens to the thoughts
Which move her mind for evil; coming here
From a new-taken town, she scorns, forsooth,
To bear the yoke; but there's a bit for pride,
And mettle that shall foam away in blood—
Thou, woman, dost thou hear? I'll stay no more,
Nor more endure to be dishonoured thus.

[*Clytaemnestra re-enters the Palace.*]

CHORUS.

But I, for I pity her, will not be angry.
Come then, O hapless one, this car forsaking,
Put on the yoke thy fate has brought thee now.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, ah! Ah! Heaven! Earth![1]
Apollo! Apollo!

[1] Ὀτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ. This curious cry does not, of course, admit of translation, and some such equivalent as the above must be sought; and similarly in other passages in this scene.

CHORUS.

What means this calling on Apollo's name?
Not to his heart were such a cry as this.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, ah! Ah! Heaven! Earth!
Apollo! Apollo!

CHORUS.

Once more amiss upon the god she calls,
Who has no part in tears.

CASSANDRA.

Apollo! Apollo!
God of the gate, destroyer that I know,
Thou hast destroyed me now and utterly!

CHORUS.

Methinks of her own ills she'd prophesy;
A slave, and yet the god breathes in her still.

CASSANDRA.

Apollo! Apollo!
God of the gate, destroyer that I know,

Ah, whither hast thou brought me? to what house?

CHORUS.

The House of Atreus—If thou know'st not this,
I tell thee, and thou'lt find my words are true.

CASSANDRA.

Ah! Ah!
A house accursed, a house whose walls have seen
Deeds of self-slaughter, streams of kindred blood,
Of human blood shed dark upon its floor.

CHORUS.

Keen scented seems the stranger, like a hound;
Aye, and the blood she's tracking she will find.

CASSANDRA.

Ah! Ah!
See they are there to witness to my words,
Babes who lament their slaying and their flesh
In that fell banquet eaten by their sire.

CHORUS.

Of thy divining fame we all have heard—
As who has not?—but seek no prophets here.

CASSANDRA.

Ah! Out, alas! What is she planning now?
What woe is this? She works—she brings it on—
O foul! O hapless house! O past all cure,
To friends unbearable—and no help nigh!

CHORUS.

These are dark utterances I know not of;
The first I knew—the city cries of them.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, miserable! Ah, wilt thou do this thing?
Cheering him with the bath, thy wedded lord?
Ah, can I tell it? nearer and more near,
Hand after hand outstretching for the end.

CHORUS.

Lost am I now, no meaning do I find
In these blind oracles of mystic lore.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, ah, then! Ah!
What is this thing? a net—

O deed of hell! a net of death, a snare—
Herself the snare and partner of his bed—
Now let the rout, for blood insatiate still,
Shriek o'er the house their ancient cry of death.

CHORUS.

What is this Fury that thou bidst to raise
A death-cry o'er the house? It cheers me not,
And at my heart the ruddy drops, that set
Through all my veins, run pale, as when a life
Ebbs from a mortal wound, and eyes grow dim,
Swift darkening in the closing shades of death.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, look! The heifer there
Keep from the bull. With her black crafty horn
She'd gore him—Ah! she has him now—
Smites him—he falls—in the bath I tell thee—there,
In the murderous bath the bloody deed is done.

CHORUS.

I cannot boast high skill in auguries,
Yet, that some ill is here, these seem to show.

But by that way what word of cheer is sent
Ever to mortals? 'Tis a craft of words,
All ill, and fraught with fear and heaviness.

CASSANDRA.

Ah! Ah! Alas!
Ah, for my hapless lot!
Wailing another's fate, I mourn my own.
Why didst thou bring me hither thus forlorn,
Unless with thee to die? Ah, wherefore not?

CHORUS.

Wild are thy words, some god inspires thy lay,
Sad as the nightingale, who ceases not,
For Itys, Itys mourning, to bewail
With piteous plaint the unending woe she bears.

CASSANDRA.

Alas, the clear-voiced warbler! with her life
The gods at least dealt tenderly, and gave
A feathered form to change her; but for me
Waits the sharp rending of dividing steel.

CHORUS.

Still thickly coming, from what god are sent
These cries of fear and pity, mated still
With song melodious? whence this knowledge sure
That sets its bounds upon thy path of woe?

CASSANDRA.

Woe for the bed! Woe for the nuptial rites
Of Paris, fraught with ruin for his race!
And thou Scamander, by whose banks of yore
I grew in youthful bloom, my native stream!
By other waters now, on that dark shore
Of wailing, shall my boding cries be heard.

CHORUS.

What is this word ill-omened, that a child
Might know for such?—It wrings my heart with pain.

CASSANDRA.

Ah for the travail! Ah the labour lost!
The travail of the city now no more!
The sacrifices of the kine that cropped
The sweet flower-meadows of my father's fields—

Victims in vain! and I, the wayward thing,
Who still foreknew the end, like them must fall.

CHORUS.

Still the same strain; surely some deity
With hard intent bears down upon thy soul,
To hymn this dirge of death—but what it means
I cannot trace, nor what the end may be.

CASSANDRA.

Lo now, no more, as bride from forth her veil,
The oracle shall peer, but coming on,
Like seas which roll against the rising sun
Before the breeze of morning, it shall bring
A mightier woe than these; so will I speak
Darkly no more. And bear me witness now,
How on the trail of time I follow down
Foul deeds wrought long ago. For from this house
Departeth not a rout of sister fiends,
Drunken with kindred blood, avengers still
Of outraged bed and violated vows.
There all day long above those towers they sit,
Choiring their threnody of ancient crime,
The curse inherited of blood that cries

For still more blood, and where shall be the end?
Have I, like archer true, now hit the mark,
Or strolling cheat and lying prophet am I?
Swear now and bear me witness before all
That of this house the evil deeds I know.

CHORUS.

How could an oath, itself a baneful thing,
Be healer of these ills? Yet do I marvel
That, bred beyond the seas, thou know'st to speak
Of things done here as though a native born.

CASSANDRA.

The Seer, Apollo, set me in this office.

CHORUS.

Was it desire for thee which moved him thus?

CASSANDRA.

Time was when shame would seal my lips in this.

CHORUS.

Aye, in good fortune we grow delicate.

CASSANDRA.

Mighty the charm with which he wrought on me.

CHORUS.

Did he prevail and win thee to his love?

CASSANDRA.

He had my promise, but I kept not faith.

CHORUS.

And had he then bestowed on thee his gifts?

CASSANDRA.

Aye, all their woes the city knew from me.

CHORUS.

What was his vengeance? How didst thou escape it?

CASSANDRA.

After that thing no man believed my words.

CHORUS.

To us at least thy words seem all too true!

CASSANDRA.

Ah! Ah, ah!
Woe, woe is me! Once more
The throes of present vision sweep upon me—
See, like dream-phantoms, there before the house,
They sit, the forms of children, done to death

By those who were their nearest; in their hands
The flesh, those inward parts, served for that meal,
The hellish banquet tasted by their sire.
For these, I say, vengeance devising waits
A dastard lion, who has made his bed
Where he that comes should lie, the rightful lord—
Aye, and my master too, for I must bear
The captive's yoke. And he, the lord of ships,
Ilium's destroyer, knows not that she-wolf,
Who stretched her tongue in welcome long drawn out,
How like a lurking Até she will work
His doom; such things she dares, against the male
To raise her hand, a woman! What may I call her?
What evil beast, for likeness? A she-dragon,
A Scylla of the rocks, the seaman's bane,
A womb of hell, her issuing brood destruction,
And death for those her nearest! With what joy,
Shouted as when the tide of battle turns,
She hailed, or seemed to hail, his safe return!
And if that likeness now no credence win,
What matter? Come it will, and when it comes,
Pity will own me for a prophet true.

CHORUS.

The fearful banquet of the children's flesh
Thyestes tasted, that I know full well,
And shudder as I hear it truly told;
But of the rest I cannot trace the clue.

CASSANDRA.

On Agamemnon's death thou'lt look, I say.

CHORUS.

Ah, miserable! hush that ill-boding word!

CASSANDRA.

No healing god there is to stay it now.

CHORUS.

If it must be; but may it never be!

CASSANDRA.

Whilst thou art praying they prepare to slay.

CHORUS.

What man deviseth this accursed thing?

CASSANDRA.

Widely thy glance has missed mine oracles.

CHORUS.

The plot I see not which could work this deed.

CASSANDRA.

And yet, too well, I know the speech of Greece!

CHORUS.

Greek are the Pythian chaunts, yet hard to spell[1].

CASSANDRA.

Ah! Ah! this fire! it rushes on me now!
Spare me, Apollo! Ah! Ah! woe is me!
See there the lioness, who with the wolf
In absence of the noble lion couched,
Slays me all helpless! In the poisoned cup,
Her wrath prepares, she pours my life-blood in,
And, with the blade she whets against her lord,

[1] A humorous hit, with reference to the ambiguity of the oracles. Another instance of this unexpected humour may be noticed at the end of the hurried consultation of the Chorus when they hear the cry of Agamemnon (p. 79). This may possibly have been intended to convey incidentally a satire on a multitude of counsellors in a crisis.

The treatment of the part of the Chorus all through this scene is very noticeable. It provides a subdued accompaniment and foil, as it were, to the outpourings of Cassandra, and prevents the emotion getting 'out of hand.'

Wreaks her dark vengeance for my bringing here.
Why do I wear these things of laughter more—
Sceptre and prophet stole about my neck?
If I must die, thee will I trample too—
Go and enrich some other doom than mine!
But see the god himself is stripping me
Of the prophetic robe, in which he willed
To trick me forth for laughter, by my friends
And enemies despised, and all in vain!
'Mountebank,' 'beggar,' 'starveling' were my names!
And now the Seer, his latest vengeance taking,
Brings me, his servant, to a doom like this;
And I, who at the altar of my sire
Once ministered, must stand beside the block,
And bow me to the bloody stroke of death.
Yet not unheeded by the gods we die;
For there shall come a champion of our cause,
To slay his mother and avenge his sire,
An exiled wanderer, to the land he left
Returning, he shall set upon this doom
The crowning stones—such oath the gods have sworn—

The unfinished pile, his father's prostrate form,
Shall be the mark far-seen to guide him home.
But why should I, an alien in the land,
Lament my fate, since they who wrought that woe,
And laid our Troy in ashes, now must drain
The cup of reckoning which the gods have filled?
Come death!—I go to meet thee. Ye dark doors
Of Hades there before me, hear my prayer!
One last I offer: mortal be the stroke,
And without pain, in darkness, may a sleep
Bear on the stream of blood my life away!

CHORUS.

O wretched in thy fate, as thou art wise,
Woman, if to thy knowledge, as thy words
Would show, thy destiny has been declared,
Why, like a victim to the altar led,
Goest thou with steps unshrinking to thy doom?

CASSANDRA.

Friends, there is no escape; delay is vain.

CHORUS.

And yet of time the latest hour prevails.

CASSANDRA.

The hour has come; by flight were little gained.

CHORUS.

Enduring art thou as thy heart is brave.

CASSANDRA.

Among the fortunate none hear such praise.

CHORUS.

Yet to die nobly is to mortals dear.

CASSANDRA.

Ah, for thee, father, and thy children true!

She starts back.

CHORUS.

What fear is this that from the doors thou startest?

CASSANDRA.

Faugh!

CHORUS.

What moves this loathing? Some new fancy stirs thee.

CASSANDRA.

These halls breathe murder and the reek of blood.

CHORUS.

Nay, 'tis the smell of the hearth-sacrifice.

CASSANDRA.

As smokes corruption from the mouldering tomb.

CHORUS.

No Syrian odours for the house were this!

CASSANDRA.

But I will go within these halls to wail
The fate of Agamemnon and my own—
Enough of life! Ah, friends, not idly thus
I shrank at entering in. Bear me this witness,
When for a woman slain a woman dies,
And for a man ill-wed a man shall fall;
This grace from strangers in my death I crave.

CHORUS.

O hapless one, I pity thee thy doom.

CASSANDRA.

Once more I fain would speak, not to lament
This fate of mine, but to the sun I pray,
Looking my last upon his light, that those,

Who yet shall come in vengeance, may requite
These murderers for the death that I must die,
Their easy victim, a poor, helpless slave.
Alas for mortal things! Where they are well,
Changed by a shadow—and, for misery,
A wetted sponge may blot the picture out.
And this, by far, than that more piteous is.

[*Cassandra enters the Palace.*]

CHORUS.

Possessing much, he hungers still for more;
This is prosperity. And who will turn
From finger-pointed halls the more that comes
Than that enough, with 'Enter now not here'?
So to this man the Blessed Ones have given
To capture Priam's town, and he returns
Honoured of heaven. But now if he must pay
The blood-debt of his sires, and by his death
Requital make for those who died of yore,
Who among mortals, hearing this, may say
He was not born to tread his path in fear?

AGAMEMNON (*within*).

Ah, I am struck—Oh, foul—a mortal blow!

CHORUS.

Hark! Wounded unto death, who cries within?

AGAMEMNON.

Again—woe's me—a second time struck down!

CHORUS.

The groaning of the king would prove 'tis done!
But while there's time, for safety take we counsel.

The Elders in succession.

ELDER 1.

To you my counsel is to raise the cry,
And call a rescue of the citizens.

ELDER 2.

To me seems best, together breaking in,
To clinch the matter with blood-dripping steel[1].

ELDER 3.

I, this opinion sharing, give my vote
For action—'tis no time to dally now.

[1] The members of the Chorus, it appears, wore swords. Cf. the controversy with Aegisthus, below.

ELDER 4.

'Tis manifest—this is but the beginning;
They work to set a tyranny upon us.

ELDER 5.

For we are losing time, and they, the while,
Scorning appearance, push their purpose on.

ELDER 6.

I know not what to follow or advise;
Whoever acts, it rests with him to counsel.

ELDER 7.

I hold the same opinion, for I see not
How words can bring the dead to life again.

ELDER 8.

What! To these home-polluters must we yield,
And have them for our rulers all our days?

ELDER 9.

Nay, 'twere past bearing; better far to die;
Death were a milder fate than slavery.

ELDER 10.

But can we on the evidence of groans
Conclude full surely that the king is dead ?

ELDER 11.

Ere we debate them we should know the facts ;
Surmise and knowledge are two different things.

CHORUS.

This, then, I see commands the general vote,
Plainly to know how fareth Atreus' son [1].

Clytaemnestra is discovered standing over the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra [2].

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

If what before to suit the hour was said
I now unsay, I take no shame in this.

[1] See note on this passage at p. 71. It appears to the writer that the scene in the original is designed with a view to the gradual lowering of the pitch of the emotion, preparatory to the reappearance of Clytaemnestra.

[2] This was effected by a mechanical contrivance known as the 'ekkyklema,' a wooden platform on which the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra would be 'rolled out,' with Clytaemnestra standing over them. Cf. Haigh's *Attic Theatre*.

For when for enemies, though seeming friends,
One lays a snare, who would not set his fence
Too high for the o'er-leaping? And for me,
Nursed in my heart, the struggle of this hour,
Which brings my triumph now, if late, has come.
I stand where I have struck, and where the deed
Is finished, and so well my work was done
Flight or resistance were alike in vain.
About him, like a net where fish are taken,
The deadly circle of this robe I cast,
And twice I smote him, and with moan twice made
He sank, and where he lay I smote again,
A blow that Death might welcome with his soul.
Thus sends he forth his life, and, as he fell,
The death-tide sobbing from him smote me o'er
The dark dew of his blood; and, as the field,
For harvest sown, beneath the rain of heaven
At its birth hour rejoices, I was glad.

That things are thus, ye elder men of Argos,
Be joyful as ye may be; as for me
I glory in them; and if seemly were it
To pour the slain an offering, I would do it,

As just and more than just—so full a cup
Of curses dark from homes this man has filled,
Which, coming back, he has himself drunk up.

CHORUS.

We marvel at thy tongue, with what bold words
Thou darest thus to vaunt thee o'er thy husband.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

As woman without sense ye'd try me now,
But I, with heart unmoved, to you who know—
And ye may praise or blame me as ye will—
Say, before all, this man is Agamemnon,
My husband, dead, the work of my right hand—
A righteous deed, well done. So stands the case.

CHORUS.

What poison, woman, gathered from what bane
Of earth, or the great water, to thine ill
Hast tasted, that upon thine head hast heaped
The curses of the people and their hate?
Thou hast cut off, and from the city so
An outcast loathed thou thyself shalt be.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

So now to exile me ye would condemn,
Accursed of the people and their hate?
Against this man though ye had naught to say,
Who his own child, like a brute beast for slaughter,
Though full his herds were teeming, thought no shame,
The dearest pang I bore, to sacrifice
To charm the winds of Thrace. Was no crime here?
No cause to drive him forth? Yet of my deeds
Ye are stern judges. But I tell you this,
And ye may mark my words who threaten now,
If in fair field ye win, ye then may rule me,
I will submit; but if to me the scale,
In the decree and will of heaven, incline,
Ye shall, though late, the way of prudence learn.

CHORUS.

Thou art full proud and these are swelling words,
As yet the murder-frenzy and the blow
Work in thy mind, and on thy brow the blood,
Which stains it, fits thy temper, but the day

Shall come, when friendless and forsaken thou,
Blow for that blow, the deed wilt expiate.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Hear ye then now my warrant—by the power
Of Justice, wrought me for my murdered child,
By Até and the Avengers, to whose wrath
This man I slew, Hope sets no foot for me
Within the house of Fear, while at my hearth
Aegisthus, to my cause devoted still,
Kindles the flame, a shield of confidence.
There lies he, the defiler of this woman,
Darling of each Chryseis under Troy,
And she, his captive slave, his augurcss,
Who shared his bed, aye, to the sailor's bench,
So faithful was she—they have had their due:
He, as thou seest; and she, whose swan-like song
Ye lately heard her chaunting for her death,
Lies to him lovingly, and adds for me
A relish, something keen, to my revenge.

CHORUS.

Ah, without pain,
Swift, with no pillowed anguish, might a-sleep

Close me mine eyes in death to wake no more;
Now that he lies, our gracious guardian, slain;
And, through a woman having much endured,
Now by a woman in his life cut off.
Woe to thee, Helen, and the lives through thee,
Many, ah, many, to the grave sent down!
Strife of their strife, who in the home wast set
A woe for husbands! . . .

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Labour no sorrow for the death of these,
Nor against Helen turn thine anger now,
. . . . .

CHORUS.

Spirit of ill, who on this house dost fall,
. . . . .

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Ah, with the truth thy speech runs even now,
The race-curse calling, . .
. . . . .

CHORUS.

Heavy upon this house, a power of dread,
The curse thou vauntest, . .

. . . . .

. . . . .

King, O king, how shall I weep for thee?
Out of my heart of love what word tell over thee?

. . . . .

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Think'st thou this work was mine? Nay, 'twas the
Curse,
Though in my shape, not I, that did the deed,
The ancient race-avenger, . .

. . . . .

. . . . .

CHORUS.

Turn where I will, all 's dark. The stricken house
Rocks to its fall. I fear the storm of blood,
In slow drops ceasing now; but beating up,
To whelm it in its blast, comes on amain
Another, in the dreadful pause the while
Fate whets her blade. O Earth, Earth,
That thou hadst closed above me ere these eyes
Looked on this sight of pity, my dear lord
Ensnared, and in the laver silver-wrought

Low laid in death!
Who now will bury him?
Who make lament for him?

. . . . .

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

By us he fell and we will bury him,
But with no sound of wailing from these halls,

. . . . .

CHORUS.

Hard is the issue, for who slayed is slain,
Spoiled is the spoiler, and the law stands sure
That he who does must suffer. From these halls
Who shall drive forth the curse to which the race
Is wedded for its doom?

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

To words of truth
Thou comest now, and with that 'daemon' I
Will plight in covenant to bear my fate,
Hard though it be, if he will hence depart,
To vex some other race with feuds of blood.
When that is gone enough there still remains.

[*Exit Clytaemnestra.*]

Enter Aegisthus.

AEGISTHUS.

O pleasant light of justice-bringing day!
Now would I say the gods above looked down
On human wrongs, and had them in their care;
Seeing this man entangled in these robes,
The Furies' weaving, for his sire's misdeeds
Just retribution, sight most sweet to me!

[*He relates the story of the feast of Thyestes—see note on the Argument—adding that, with his father, Thyestes, he was driven into exile by Atreus while yet an infant.*]

But Justice brought me back, and now this man
Has felt my hand, as, from without, I shaped
The whole hard plot. There in the toils he lies,
And, come what may, I care not so that be.

CHORUS.

Insult, Aegisthus, in distress I praise not.
That thou didst slay this man thy words confess,
Contriving all his murder. But be sure
Death by the people's stoning shall be thine.

AEGISTHUS.

Speakest thou so, thou at the lower oar,
To those who rule the ship? But thou shalt know,
Old as thou art, how grievous 'tis to learn
The lesson late of prudence. There's a medicine,
Bonds and the pains of hunger, passing keen
To school the oldest. Look upon this, and so
Kick not against the pricks to thine own pain.

CHORUS.

Thou woman, thou! who, staying here at home,
Defiledst a brave man's bed, . .

AEGISTHUS.

For these thy words
Right dearly shalt thou pay. . .
. . . . .

CHORUS.

Why, O vile soul,
Didst thou not dare thyself to do the deed,
But with the woman, for thy base design,
Has brought this dark pollution on the land?

Ah, in the light of heaven if living still,
Will not Orestes come again and bring
Death for you both, in one destruction slain!

AEGISTHUS.

Since ye will have it so, it shall be done;
Come on, my henchmen!

CHORUS.

On we too, and draw
Each one his sword—

. . . . .

Enter Clytaemnestra.

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Dearest of men, forbear; enough has been
The harvest of these woes; it needs not now
To shed more blood. Go thou within, and these
Let them from hence betake them, ere there come
More trouble. In the destined course these things
Have been accomplished; and if now their end
Might be, right welcome were it, smitten sore
As we have been beneath the heel of fate.

AEGISTHUS.

That these should let their rank tongue blossom so,
Insulting me, their ruler, and their fate
Tempting in folly!

CHORUS.

On base men to fawn
Is not the wont of Argives!

AEGISTHUS.

Ye shall pay
A reckoning dear for this.

CHORUS.

Not so, if heaven
Shall bring again Orestes.

AEGISTHUS.

Well I know
How men in exile still on hopes are fed.

CHORUS.

Since thou canst do it now, work on, grow fat,
And trample justice down!

AEGISTHUS.

Know, for this folly
Ye yet shall pay the debt!

CHORUS.

Boast now and strut,
Like cock beside his partlet!

CLYTAEMNESTRA.

Heed thou not
These idle barkings. Thou and I together,
Ruling these halls, will all things order well.

THE END

NOTE TO 'THE HOUSE OF ATREUS.'

THE story of the play is continued and completed in the two dramas, the *Libation-bearers*, in which Orestes slays Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra, and is driven forth by the avenging Furies of his mother; and the *Eumenides* (a euphemistic name for the Furies), in which the curse of blood is allayed by the influence and ordinance of Pallas Athene (goddess of Wisdom), and the ancient goddesses consent to forgo their wrath, are reconciled to the newer gods in the person of Apollo, and have their worship established at Athens.

ALCESTIS

***

A PLAY, AFTER EURIPIDES

'... Sacred relics, gentle whispers, and the breath of better times, that from the traditions of more ancient nations came, at length, into the flutes and trumpets of the Greeks.'

BACON: *The Wisdom of the Ancients.*

TO MY MOTHER

NOTE

THE author of this play is under an obligation, which he desires to acknowledge, to M. Georges Rivollet, whose play *Alkestis* he had the great pleasure of witnessing in Paris in 1900, at the Comédie Française. The author has borrowed some stage devices, and some thoughts and expressions, from that play, but he desires to say that, subject to this, the two plays are distinct, both in sentiment and construction. In its main features the present play follows the drama of Euripides throughout.

ARGUMENT

Apollo, having been condemned by Zeus to serve a mortal, becomes a herdsman in the house of Admetus, King of Thessaly, and, when Admetus is about to die, secures from the Fates that he may live for a term equal to his former life, provided he finds a substitute to die for him. His parents and friends being unwilling to render him this service, Alcestis, his wife, devotes herself to death in his stead. But Heracles, who is journeying in the performance of a labour, having arrived, and learning from a servant what has befallen Alcestis, goes to her tomb, rescues her from Death, and brings her back to Admetus.

Admetus is the son of Pheres, reputed to have been the founder of the city of Pherae.

Alcestis is the daughter of Pelias, King of Iolcus, whose nephew was Jason, the leader of the Argonauts.

PERSONS REPRESENTED

APOLLO.

DEATH.

ADMETUS.

HERACLES.

PHERES.

SERVANT.

MESSENGER.

ALCESTIS.

FEMALE SERVANT.

CHORUS OF OLD MEN OF PHERAE.

CHILDREN (Boy and Girl) of Admetus and Alcestis.

SERVANTS, MOURNERS, CITIZENS, &c.

SCENE:

Before the Palace of Admetus, in Pherae of Thessaly.

ALCESTIS

PROLOGUE

SCENE I.

Before the Palace Between Night and Dawn.

APOLLO, *alone.*

APOLLO.

O PALACE of Admetus, home of men,
Where I, a god, have served among the slaves—
Such was Jove's sentence—for he slew my son,
And I, the forgers of his murderous bolts
In rage destroying, was condemned to serve
A mortal to my shame—such is the power
Of him to whom both men and gods must bow.
So, hither coming, in this house I served,
Tending the flocks, and he, my mortal lord,

In the poor herdsman reverenced the god.
Holy the house and pure in heart its lord.
And, for that 'tis my godlike quality
Such to befriend, I have preserved this house
Unto this day, and from the Fates did win
The life of its loved lord, old Pheres' son.
But those dread goddesses, to grant the boon,
Made hard condition, that another life
Should fall in forfeit, and the insatiate grave
Still have its toll. So, questioning his friends,
His aged sire, his mother deep in years,
He found none willing in his place to die,
Save one, his fair, young wife, who now within,
Borne in their hands, is breathing out her life.
'Tis now the destined day and she must die,
Ah, me! and I must quit these dear abodes;
Where the dead are for gods is ground impure.
Alas, poor house!

Enter DEATH.

But here, true to his hour,
Comes the accursed shape. He keeps his tryst,
Like a young gallant hungering for his bride.

SCENE II.

Apollo, Death.

DEATH.

Ah, ah, Apollo, wherefore dost thou wait
Before these doors?

APOLLO.

I wait, it seems, for Death.

DEATH.

Ever athwart my path! What means that bow?
Think'st thou again to rob me of my prize?

APOLLO.

The bow I bear, as is my right and due,
That gods and men may know and honour me.

DEATH.

I too have rights, though fraud and violence
May bate their measure. Was it not enough
To save Admetus, and must thou essay
To rob me of this woman?

APOLLO.

What do we owe thee?
When was there robbery in fair exchange?
Hadst thou Admetus then his wife should live,
But now she waits thee.

DEATH.

So! Then stand aside.
Alcestis!

APOLLO.

Ah! Have pity on her youth,
So young and fair!

DEATH.

Alcestis!

APOLLO.

Stay thine hand!
'Tis but a moment, when thou hast all time
To reap such flowers.

DEATH.

Alcestis!

APOLLO.

Let her live!

DEATH.

No!

APOLLO.

For her life, at best, is but a span,
Poor mortal of a day! and shall we gods
Envy that little, hedged about with pain,
And dim with apprehension, yet withal
Cheered with some comfort from these rays divine?
Let her live out her day, while yet its joys
May be her portion, love and motherhood,
Honour of children, reverence of age,
And when her eyes are dim, and trembling knees
Bow 'neath the burden of her wasted frame,
Then reap the whitened harvest—'tis thy due.

DEATH.

No! for her hour is come, and I am here,
By words unmoved. What is her youth to me,
Save that, in dying, she is mourned the more,
And I more honoured in her obsequies?
If all died old, where were my meed of tears,
My groans, my broken hearts, my rending sighs?
I have my hecatombs, as thou hast thine,

And do I grudge thee? Leave me then my dues.

He goes up.

Alcestis! to my realm I summon thee;
Thine hour is come, and thou must follow me.

APOLLO.

Stay! Once again I ask—not born to sue—
But, for this house is dear unto my heart,
And that heart guileless, I implore this boon—
Oh, let her live!

DEATH.

Not I! Thou know'st my ways:
Fate cuts the thread, and Death for no man stays.

APOLLO.

Yet thou wilt stay—for now begins to stir
My soul of divination, and I see
Some one advancing. To this house he comes—
A man of mighty mould, and on his brow
Courage sits throned. His task to bring away
The chariot steeds whose food is flesh of men,
Stalled by King Diomede in the hills of Thrace.
Him doth Admetus welcome, and the prize,
Thou hadst, is lost—he hales her from thine arms!

DEATH.

Keep thy divinings for these human fools;
They move me not. This hour is mine, and thou
Shalt not withstand me.

APOLLO.

Pass then, and my hate
Go with thee, hateful to both gods and men!

[*Exit* APOLLO.

SCENE III.

DEATH, A SERVANT.

DEATH (*knocking at the Palace door*).

Open the door!

SERVANT.

What art thou?

DEATH.

I am Death.

[*Presses in. The* SERVANT *utters a low cry.*

CURTAIN.

ACT I

Before the Palace. Morning.

Scene I.

Chorus—*divided into Semi-Choruses.*

CHORUS 1.

What means this silence at the Palace gates?

CHORUS 2.

Hark!

CHORUS 1.

Not a sound. 'Tis like a house deserted.
The door left open and the entrances,
With service unapparelled, seem to speak
The woe we feared.

CHORUS 2.

Oh! is there none to tell us
If we must weep for our departed queen,
Or lives she still?

CHORUS 1.

I know not what to think.
There would be sounds of wailing were she dead.
This silence lends me hope, and look, good friends,
No lustral font stands yet before the gates,
As is the rite of the dead.

CHORUS 2.

Ah! might she live!
For losing her we lose a friend indeed.
Yet, if she lives, this day the king must die,
Our lord Admetus. Bitter choice and hard!
Living, to mourn in widowed solitude,
Dying, to leave him and this light of day.

CHORUS 1.

All has been tried, our altars smoke with blood,
A dearer sacrifice the gods require,
Which only love may offer—but what thoughts
Must rend his royal breast!

CHORUS 2.

Yet life is sweet—
I neither praise nor blame him, for these things

Come from some god. But glorious indeed
Will be her fame!

CHORUS 1.

Would that some helper
Might yet arise, O Paean[1], for these ills!
Ah! some one comes!

CHORUS 2.

Tell us, does the queen live?

Scene II.

The same, A Female Servant.

SERVANT.

She lives—

CHORUS.

Ah!

SERVANT.

Yet lives not—

CHORUS.

Alas!

[1] Apollo the Healer.

SERVANT.

For the end is near,
And even now she breathes her life away.

CHORUS.

O house made desolate! O hapless king!
What loss is ours and thine!

SERVANT.

My royal master
Will learn this lesson yet.

CHORUS.

Is there no hope?
Will nothing save her?

SERVANT.

Nothing, as I ween;
For 'tis reported through the palace courts,
That on the edge of the dawn, while yet the house
Was sleeping, came a knocking at the gates,
And he who opened, lying by the door
That night in service, mouths a trembling tale
Of one who, as he opened, bore him down,
And passed into the house, and, as he passed,
He told his name—'twas the dread god of death.

CHORUS.

O great Apollo, save us! She must die;
The best of women and the truest wife
That ever lived in Hellas!

SERVANT.

What she is,
You know not yet, and hearing you will marvel.
For when she knew the destined day had come,
And that this fate might not be turned aside,
With purest water from the river taken
She made ablution; then, in vesture clad
As for a festival, she stood and prayed
In lowly adoration at the shrine
Of Hestia, hearth-goddess—thus she prayed:
'O holy mistress of the hearth and home,
As I have honoured thee, now lend thine ear
To my last prayer, not for myself, but those
I leave to-day—protect my orphan children;
Oh, grant them happiness and length of days,
A loving wife to one, to the other a husband
Noble and worthy, nor, as their mother dies,
To die untimely!'

Then from hall to hall
She passed, and at each altar made her prayer,
With offerings due of flowers and myrtle crowns.
Tearless she went without one groan or cry;
Nor could we mark her natural beauty dimmed
For all that evil.

Then, seeing us weeping—
For tears flowed fast—she gave her hand to each,
In kindly comfort; nor was there one so mean,
Through all the house, whom she addressed not, and
Was answered in return. Thus took she leave
And passed to her own chamber.

Then, at last,
Her speech came choked with tears: 'O nuptial bed,
Where he I loved received me as his bride,
Farewell! for him I die, as I have lived,
Loving and faithful. If, in days to come,
Another claim this place, more fortunate
Perchance she may be, not more chaste than I.'
She said, and weeping on the bed she pressed
Kisses with tears, leaving, yet loth to leave,
And oft returning, while about her clung
Her children—and then came those last farewells;

She could no more, and in her husband's arms
Fainting she lay awhile. Then to the light
She bade him lead her—in his arms she comes.

CHORUS.

Spoken by several of the Chorus.

O heavy fate! how will he bear to lose her?
Silence! She comes.
How pale she is!
She speaks.

Scene III.

The same, Admetus, Alcestis.

ALCESTIS.

O light of day! and O ye radiant clouds,
Which float upon the airy tides of heaven,
Behold me!

ADMETUS.

Ah! look down upon our pain!
How have we sinned? What outraged deity
Demands so dear a debt, that I must lose thee
Thus in thy prime?

ALCESTIS.

O Earth! O home beloved!
Farewell! I dream.... Methinks once more I see
The chambers of the palace where I dwelt,
Whilst yet a maid, within my native land—
Iolcus ....
Ah! that boat! That fearful man!
He leans upon his oar—he summons me—
'Come, come, 'tis time; thou seest I stay for thee;
Why this delay? Charon the old am I,
Death's ferryman' ... with lashing, bitter words
He hales me o'er. [*Sobbing.*

ADMETUS.

Ah, me! What voyage were this?
Thou shalt not leave me—see, thou hast me still.

ALCESTIS.

Hold me! Thou hast me not. He draws me down,
The dreadful messenger with sable wings;
He who stood there before me—passing the door—
[*Pointing to the Palace.*
Seest thou him not? He stands and points the way,

A fearful path through shadows yawning down.
Save me! Ah, what wilt thou with me? Unhand me!
Ah! [*Falls back fainting.*

ADMETUS.

Woe, woe is me!

ALCESTIS.

Let me lie down.

They take her to a marble bench.

The fearful dream is past,
And the dark presence, terrible no more,
Wafts night into my eyes and kindlier peace.
Bring me my children.

CHILDREN.

Mother!

ALCESTIS.

Ah, my chicks,
My pretty babes, yours is a loss indeed!
And, seeing you, the gushing wells of grief
Break forth anew. Who now will mother you?
Who will befriend you? With what smile at morn?
At close of day what comfortable word
Will lull your slumbers? Here is my grief indeed,

For these my desolation, for I leave
These desolate—my loved ones. [*Sinks down.*

ADMETUS.

Oh, this cannot be!
Ye gods, this may not be—would I had died—
Would I had died—death were as naught to this!
Alcestis, my own wife, my darling queen,
Look up—thou canst not leave us! [*Embracing her.*

ALCESTIS.

Ah, from thy lips,
Dear heart, I seem to live.

ADMETUS.

Thou shalt, take courage—
Look on thy children.

ALCESTIS.

No! It may not be;
I feel my end approaching, and the time
Grows short. Hear now my dying words. My husband,
I loved thee, as thou knowest, and have lived
Loving thee in all honour, thy true wife.

And of my love this hour which takes me from thee
Gives proof, if proof were needed. Willingly
I die, not bearing without thee to live.
Not in exchange—for my free choice and offering
Would brook no barter—but in pledge of the love
Thou bearest me, and for these orphan babes,
I ask one boon—Oh, let no other woman
Usurp my wedlock, and a mother's love
Give place to a step-mother's envious hate.
Ever for such the fruit of earlier loves
Was bitter; and to know that this hard fate
Will not assail these pledges of our joy,
Were comfort at the end. Promise me this.

ADMETUS.

I promise, and that promise on their heads
Seal with a vow, never to wed again.
Never within these walls another woman
Shall share my bed and crown. Beyond the grave
Thou art my wife. Oh, now I see my life
Nothing without thee, yet for these I live,
These to protect and, under Heaven's high will,
To render worthy of their state and thee.

And, when my task is done, Oh then, come death,
And bear me to these faithful arms again!

ALCESTIS.

Thy words bring comfort, and I die in peace.
Live in your father's love. [*Embracing her children.*
Take them, my husband.
I am no more. The shadows close about me—
Thy hand, beloved, . . . ah! [*Dies.*

CHORUS.

The queen is dead.

ADMETUS.

Oh, shame upon my head! Oh, woe is me!
What have I done? Why did ye suffer this?
False friends to me, seeking your craven ends,
To let her die, doubtless that I might live
To keep you scathless! Miserable race!
Drawing your pleasures from the woes of kings,
What care you so you prosper? Fire and sword
Would be your portion, did not those, who sit
Where your dull envy clamours, make your lives

Their thankless care.

They fall back before him.

But most I hate that age,

[*Turning to the Palace.*

Which, hardly living, in the grave's cold shadow,
Cumbering the earth, with all its pleasures sated,
Grudged a few limping years for this young life.
Ah, woe is me!

CHORUS.

Grief does him violence! O king, in this
Thou wrongst thy noble nature and high Heaven.
What man seeks death? And yet to all it comes,
Or soon or late. What thou now sufferest
Is no new thing. Oh, be advised, and take
Some comfort in submission to the gods.

ADMETUS.

Take our hand. We know it, and have known it long,
And on our path the shadow of this fate
Has lain these many days. Before the gods
We bow our head, o'er-mastered. Fare thee well,
Beloved, who, in dying, hast redeemed

A life, which, treasured for its happiness,
I now see yoked with cheerless widowhood,
To ends I thought not of. And now, my friends,
Raise to the deity, who reigns below,
Your antiphone of song, while we prepare
The dead for burial; whom, at set of sun,
We will bear forth with solemn requiem.
Till then attend us. Throughout all the city
We do ordain, in honour of this queen,
A general mourning. Hushed be every pipe,
Silent the lyre, till twelve full moons be past.
For never, through the ages, shall be found
One worthy of more honour, or for whom
A heavier sorrow follows to the tomb.
Lead on. Ourselves shall bear this burden in.

[*He carries in the body.*

CHORUS.

Daughter of Pelias, O queen revered,
In death most glorious, how art thou taken
Untimely from thy people! Fare thee well!
We mourn for thee and hold thy memory dear.

CURTAIN.

ACT II

SCENE I.

Before the Palace. Evening.

The people begin to assemble for the funeral rites.

1ST CITIZEN.

This should be a brave funeral, good brother.

2ND CITIZEN.

Aye, by the gods, there will be no lack of baked meats, as I hear, and wine to slake our grief withal.

1ST CITIZEN.

'Tis most fit. She was a most virtuous queen, and ever regarded the people.

3RD CITIZEN.

I do indeed fear the king without her. But what the gods send we must bear.

2ND CITIZEN.

I would she were with us. I speak not of death, but Charon and his boat were naught to me. They say he belabours poor souls with his oar, which is, as 'twere, a rude measure for great folks.

1ST CITIZEN.

Aye, for they be not used to blows. Well, well! God ha' mercy on us all!

3RD CITIZEN.

Stand to. Here come the elders of the city with the funeral gifts.

Enter the CHORUS *with funeral gifts.*

CHORUS.

Lay here your offerings, and while we wait
The bearing of this royal burial forth,
Invoke with me, in solemn strains and slow,
The inexorable god, who, little moved
By prayers, may find—Oh, might it be!—in tears
A sacrifice propitious for the dead.

Let minstrelsy begin, and do ye raise
In answering antiphone the choral song.

For declamation to music.

PART I[1].

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.

Tears have no measure, sorrow needs no shame,
To mourn so loved a life. Begin then, Muse,
The heavy strain, and teach me how to mourn.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS.

For thou, Melpomene, didst erst receive
The ringing lyre from the great Father's hands,
The lyre and liquid tones of solemn song.

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.

Sunk is that head in the long sleep of death,
That dear, dear head—ah, lady, friend beloved,
Shall faith and honour ever find thy peer?

2ND SEMI-CHORUS.

Ah! might ye tune your lyre to sweeter lays
Than ever Orpheus woke by wood or stream,

[1] Part I is adapted from Horace, *C.* i. 24.

To that faint ghost the blood comes not again,
Which once dread Hermes with his awful wand
Has gathered in.

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.

'Tis hard; but comfort still
Seek we in bearing what high Heaven decrees.

PART II.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS.

Daughter of Pelias, from the seed divine
Of heroes sprung, now art thou setting forth
On thy last journey. Lady, fare thee well!

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.

Already on the brink of that dark shore,
Which winds about the sullen Stygian tide,
She waits, and from her sorrowing lord implores
The last sad rites, which grant her passage o'er.

2ND SEMI-CHORUS.

Soon will she have them, soon the earth will fall
On that dear head, which, lowly laid within,
Sleeps the long sleep from which she wakes no more.

1ST SEMI-CHORUS.

O thou dread deity who reign'st below,
Spare her thy terrors, we implore, and bring
Her soul at last to realms of peace and joy!

SCENE II.

The same, A MESSENGER.

MESSENGER.

Sirs, by your leave, I have made speed to tell you,
Lest sudden interruption mar these rites,
When they are toward, that the hero famed,
Mightiest Heracles, on the instant comes
Unto our city. Journeying alone,
He hails the watch upon the western gate,
Asking if all is well, and how it fares
With our good lord Admetus—whom he comes
E'en now to greet. Upon his way the people
Grow clamorous in welcome at the sight
Of one whose fame resounds throughout all Hellas.
Nor doth report belie him, for his form

In strength shows more than mortal, and he wears
The cloak of the lion's skin.

CHORUS.

This were a guest
Indeed to welcome, but at such a time . . .

MESSENGER.

Aye, 'twas *my* thought, and therefore came I hither
In haste to tell you.

CHORUS.

Let these funeral gifts
Be put from sight, till the king's will be known,
For the which end one of our councillors
Will straight seek audience, while we await
Alcmena's godlike son.

Shouts are heard beyond. Enter HERACLES.

HERACLES.

Mine hosts, dwellers on this Pheraean soil,
Say, shall I find Admetus in the palace?

CHORUS.

The son of Pheres is within, my lord.
But tell me, Heracles, upon what need

Thou visitest this far Thessalian land,
Arriving at our city.

HERACLES.

I am bound
Upon a labour, which is laid upon me
By him I serve, under the hand of Zeus,
The king Eurystheus.

CHORUS.

Where, and what this journey?

HERACLES.

Into the hills of Thrace, where Diomede
Holds impious rule; my task to bring away
His chariot steeds.

CHORUS.

A fearful enterprise!
Many have gone, who never have returned
From that wild fastness, and these chariot steeds
Are fed on flesh of men.

HERACLES.

Who yet were eaten
Perchance by mountain beasts.

CHORUS.

Nay, but 'tis so,
As thou wilt see.

HERACLES.

Ah, well, it is my task,
And I must meet it, though this fate of mine
Grows ever steeper. Pah! I'll not think upon it—
Here is a friendly hearth and I would in,
To greet your lord, my guest in days gone by
In mine own Argos.

CHORUS.

Lo, from the palace doors
The king comes forth.

Scene III.

The same, Admetus (*in black*).

ADMETUS.

Hail to thee, son of Zeus,
From Perseus sprung.

HERACLES.

Joy to thee too, Admetus,
Of Thessaly the king.

ADMETUS.

Would that there were;
But thy kind heart I know.

HERACLES.

What word is this?
For whom these weeds of mourning that thou wearest?

ADMETUS.

One of my household whom to-day we bear
To burial.

HERACLES.

Not of thine own? A child?

ADMETUS.

Nay, they are well.

HERACLES.

Thy parents? They are old.

ADMETUS.

They too still live.

HERACLES.

Nay, tell me all; my heart is full of fear.
Surely 'tis not thy wife, thy loved Alcestis?

ADMETUS.

'Tis well with her. (*Movement.*)
I say with her 'tis well.

HERACLES.

But thou art weeping. These are not the tears
For any stranger. Tell me, who is dead?

ADMETUS.

A woman. 'Twas of a woman that I spoke just now.

HERACLES.

Of thine own kin, or stranger in the house?

ADMETUS.

Under another sky she saw the light,
But, left an orphan, here she lived some while,
Though not of mine own kin.

HERACLES.

But still, thou lovedst her.
Would that I had not found thee sorrowing!

[*Turns to go.*

ADMETUS.

Thou art not going?

HERACLES.

Aye, to some other shelter.

ADMETUS.

Never! Oh, heaven forfend, that to a guest
This house should close its doors. What! thou, my friend,
Weary with travel, to another hearth
To turn away! Nay, thou shalt rest thee here.

HERACLES.

Thou hast my thanks, but to a friend in grief
A guest is burdensome.

ADMETUS.

The dead are dead,
And we who live must live. Thou shalt not go.
Wide is the palace and the court so laid
That our guest chambers give not on these quarters.
Welcome, and enter. That which we must do
Will touch thee not. Ye there, go bid our stewards

Make ready and provide this noble guest
With largest entertainment. Lead him in.

HERACLES.

I needs must yield!

ADMETUS.

Sleep and good cheer go with thee.

HERACLES *is escorted in.*

Now close the inner doors, that to our guest,
Harboured within, the voice of wailing come not,
To cause him sadness as he sits at meat.
See to it straightly.

CHORUS.

What hast thou done, my lord?
Hast thou the heart, at such a time as this,
To welcome strangers? Nay, this is but madness.

ADMETUS.

Had I repelled him from this hearth and city,
Would ye have praised me more? A guest, a friend,
Himself the soul of hospitality,
Turned from the door! How had my grief been less?
Am I with churlishness to whet the edge
Of my affliction?

CHORUS.

If, as thy lips avow,
He is a friend, why didst thou then conceal
The truth of thy misfortune?

ADMETUS.

Had he known,
He never would have entered. Oh, I see
My days are darkened and the hand of fate
Heavy upon me; but to spurn a guest
These halls have learned not yet. The sun is down.
Go in, and to her last long resting-place
Bear forth the dead; and you, kind friends, attend her,
With all due preparation to the grave.

[ADMETUS *enters the Palace.*

SCENE IV.

CHORUS.

O hospitable house! O kindly halls!
To all thrown open, here it was that thou,

Glorious Apollo, deignedst to find a home;
Content awhile to lead a shepherd's life,
Piping the flocks adown these sloping hills.
And here came Orpheus, to whose lyre the trees
Did bow themselves to hear him as he went,
Seeking with tears his lost Eurydice.
O tender memories! O house of fame!
How art thou stricken—mourn thy loss to-day!

Scene V.

The same, Admetus.

The funeral procession appears, coming out of the Palace. A wailing note is sounded on horns.

COMPANY OF CHORUS. *With raised hands.*

Mourn. . . . Mourn, house of Pheres. . . .
. . . Mourn!

ADMETUS.

Set down the bier, and hither bring, good friends,
Your last sad offerings. Then unto the grave
Bear the dead hence.

CHORUS.

Dear lady, take these gifts,
With salutations due, and fare thee well!

ADMETUS.

Ah, woe is me! What flowers are these ye bring,
Herself the fairest? Thanks, my thanks, kind friends;
'Tis well. Now o'er the dead, in order standing,
Rehearse a parting dirge. Minstrels, begin.

CHORUS.

For declamation to music [1].

Sing woe, sing woe the day, the day for us returning,
Who greet thee, lady, only at thy grave,
To thy dumb ashes telling o'er, in accents burning,
Those rites, 'tis said, departed spirits crave;
All that we can—with tears—the words our fathers taught us—
Then, if the dead may hear us from the shore

[1] Adapted from Catullus, 'Multas per gentes'—
'Homewards, a traveller, from many lands returning,
I greet thee, brother, only at thy grave,' &c.

Of their departing o'er those sad and lonely waters,
Hearken—and fare thee well for evermore!

[*A roll of muffled drums.*

ADMETUS.

Enough! It rends my heart. Take up the bier,
And onward to the tomb.

CHORUS.

Stay! for I see
Thine aged father with slow step advancing,
And servants with him, bearing in their hands
Adornment for the dead.

Enter PHERES, *coming out of the Palace.*

SCENE VI.

The same, PHERES.

PHERES.

My son, I heard
The voice of lamentation, and I come
With offerings due in honour of the dead.

And rightly is she honoured, who has died
To save thy life and give me back my son.
I share thy sorrow. 'Twas a noble deed,
And thou hast lost in her a peerless wife.
None will deny it. Yet, though hard it be,
Bear sorrow like a man. Farewell to thee,
Noble and virtuous lady, who hast left
A bright example of what wives may be.

ADMETUS.

I did not ask thy presence at these rites,
Nor is it welcome. She, who now is dead,
Needs not thy offerings. What! thou mourn the dead,
Whom thou let'st die! Thou shouldst have shown thy care
For me and this young life when it was needed.
Thy son! I think not; nor my mother she
Who such is called.
By heaven, thou art the pattern of all cowards,
Who, on the brink of death, couldst hoard thy years,
And let her perish. What hast thou not had

That life could give thee? Pleasure of youthful days,
Princely attendance and obsequious service,
And, for thy house and heritage, a son
To keep and rule them for thy children's children!
I have been ever dutiful and made
Thine age my care, and this is thy return!

[*Pointing to the bier.*

Go, get thee sons to tend thy closing years,
Thou art no more my parent; on this bier
My wife, my father and my mother lie.
What vanity,
The old man's prayer for death and his complaints
Of life's long weariness! Let death but come,
See how he hugs the life he hated then!

CHORUS.

Oh, my son! enough, enough the present woe;
Goad not thy father's soul to fury thus.

PHERES.

Child! dost thou dare to mouth me? Thinkest thou
I am some Phrygian slave bought with thy gold?
This arm may now be weak, but words of truth
Shall yet chastise thy braggart insolence.

What art thou but through me? This house, these lands,
Estate and subjects, all thou hast from me.
To rule them I begat thee, bred thee up,
Set thee in power, fenced thee about with peace—
'Tis not enough, it seems, but I must add
To these the debt of dying in thy stead.
Parents must die for children! 'Tis a law
I learned not from my sires, nor have I heard it,
As yet, in Hellas. These are maggots bred
From peace-fed ease and hoarded affluence.
When thou hast lived my life then call me coward.
Old I may be, but not on terms like these.

[*Pointing to the bier.*

Get thee more wives, and if they'll die for thee,
As she did, thou may'st come to live for ever.

[*Laughs to himself.*

CHORUS.

Enough! for shame! revile not thine own son.

ADMETUS.

Let him revile—He heard the truth from me;
I care not how he like it.

PHERES.

Insolence!

Thou darest to call me coward! That life is sweet,
This crime of thine, methinks, is proof enough.

[*Pointing to the bier.*

My life is mine!

ADMETUS.

Outlive then Zeus himself!

PHERES.

Ha! Dost thou curse thy parents, lost to shame?

ADMETUS.

Begone, begone—Oh, get thee hence, and leave me
To bury mine own dead.

PHERES.

Say thine own victim.

Coward! Ha! I'll get me in to my old dame;
She bears a breath of comfort in her still.

[*Exit* PHERES, *laughing to himself.*

CHORUS.

How lost to feeling truly is old age!

ADMETUS.

Ah, hadst thou lived it had not come to this!

[*Throwing himself on the bier.*

CHORUS.

My lord, my lord, refrain;
This grief must be endured.

ADMETUS.

Oh, bear her hence,
And do ye take me with her to the tomb.

CHORUS.

Raise ye your burden, and with slow lament
Lead on.

A slow march is played. ADMETUS *is supported by* ATTENDANTS. *As he goes out he gives vent to his grief in loud cries.*

CURTAIN.

ACT III

SCENE I.

Before the Palace. Night.

SERVANT, *with others, bringing torches and wine.*

SERVANT.

Set here the wine.

[*The other servants go out.*

A hateful guest indeed!
What! must we wake and watch a night like this,
To serve a drunken rouse? Ah, my poor mistress!
What means my lord in this? Many ere now
The guests this house has welcomed, and on whom
I have attended, but for one so shameless
Ne'er have I spread the board. First he made bold
To enter, though he saw my master's grief;

Then sits he down and takes what cheer we had,
Not soberly, as would beseem our sorrow,
But feasting. Nay! did aught we fail to bring,
He bade us fetch it. Next, within his hands
Grasping a goblet, of the grape's dark tide
Deep draughts he drained, until the mounting fumes
Heated his senses, and his head he crowned
With myrtle sprays, howling discordantly.
Thus sits he for these hours, without a thought
For the dark trouble brooding in these halls.
The while we servants mourned our mistress dear,
Hiding our sorrow, as our lord commanded,
To please this stranger-guest—belike some ruffian,
Some brigand from the hills—while to the grave
They bore her forth, nor did I follow her,
Or stretch my hands in mourning to the bier—
She who was as a mother to us all—
Vile roisterer! we hate thee. Ah! yet more!

[HERACLES *is heard coming out.*

SCENE II.

The same, HERACLES. *His head wreathed with a garland and a wine-cup in his hand.*

HERACLES. *Declaiming.*

'Crown the bowl and wreathe the brow,
Roses bring and rosemary.' . . .

I like some poems with a little wine,
But could not make one. 'Sdeath, that must be harder
Than strangling the beast whose skin adorns
My noble form. Ha! more wine, good idiot!

The servant fills his cup, which he drains.

Canst thou sing, glum-face?

[*Declaiming again.*

'Now the hour invites, and now
Phoebus sinks beneath the sea.

Now, for all, let love's clear star
Hold sweet influence through the night,
Till the Dawn, with rushing car,
Puts the stars again to flight.'

That smacks of weather and the snuff o' the morn.
Sirrah, more wine! 'Tis good to be at ease.
[*Sits down.*
Toil and more toil; climbs on the steep to-morrow
Ever beyond me. Why and to what end?
Nay, there's no knowing. Tush! but I'll outsoar it.
A friendly hearth, a cup of kindling wine,
I'll drink to fortune and the stars which set
My cradled fate, and scattered golden hours
Like these, if seldom, yet enough to show
Soft mid the brazen roughness of my days.
Ha, ha, ha! My thoughts swim out
Upon a sea of easy, pleasant things.
This wine is good. There steps my lady moon,
Pale, dainty huntress of the starry fields.
What toil's amiss beneath the open sky?
And, after toil, to dream about a bowl,
Sometimes of labours past, sometimes of love—
Though love's a fool—ha, ha!—a fool—so 'tis.
Methinks with women I am something simple—
And yet I like them well. Jove, how they fooled
me,
When I did sit and spin with Omphalé!

Dressed in her gown—ha, ha!—and wound her wool—
She and her pretty maids—how they did laugh!
[*Laughs loudly.*

SERVANT.

O ye gods!

HERACLES.

Ho, sirrah! Why that solemn, thoughtful look?
Servants to scowl on guests? 'Tis a new fashion.
They should be courteous. Is a stranger's death
Occasion for such grief? Come hither, friend,
And learn more wisdom. Dost thou rightly know
The nature of this mortal state? I trow not.
How shouldest thou? Then lend an ear to me.
Death is the common debt. We all must die.
To-morrow, if he see it, no man knows,
Or what its fortune. Hearken then and learn
Wisdom from me. Be merry, drink thy cup
To-day, while it is thine; and for the rest,
Yield it to Fortune. And to Cypris too,
Sweetest of gods to men, thy tribute pay.
Those other cares let be. In this is wisdom.
Think thyself fortunate to meet the wise.

Come, we have passed the door, wreathe now thy brow,
And drink a cup with me. The plash of wine
Will ripple round those harboured hulks of grief,
And float them from thee. Mortals as we are,
Our thoughts should border with mortality;
Nor, since we bear its burdens, hang about them
These leaden trappings—scowling looks and frowns:
'Tis but to make misfortune, and to miss
The joys that we might have.

SERVANT.

All this I know,
But revelry and laughter ill beseem
Our present state.

HERACLES.

This woman was a stranger;
Why such excess of grief? If thou didst mourn
The rulers of thy house, thou couldst not more.
Be happy they are living.

SERVANT.

Living! How?
Thou knowest not the troubles of this house.

HERACLES.

Tush, man! Thy master told me when I came,
And bade me enter.

SERVANT.

'Twas no time for this!

HERACLES.

What! must we fast because a stranger dies?

SERVANT.

Did he say 'stranger'? Well, my master knows,
And 'tis not mine to question what he says.

HERACLES.

Ha! Is there something here? Has he deceived me?
'Twere a strange wrong! Speak! Who is it that is dead?

SERVANT.

My lord, thou seest with what pain we serve thee,
Though not unused to guests, many and famous.
Sorrow is come upon us, and the time
Mocks entertainment. (*Weeps.*) Pardon me, my lord;
I wrong thee and my master in these tears.

HERACLES.

Nay, thou shalt speak. (*Shaking him roughly.*) Who is it that is dead?

SERVANT. *Frightened.*

Sir, 'tis Alcestis. Ah! what have I said?

HERACLES.

His wife! . . . Thou saidst his wife? Alcestis?

SERVANT.

Aye.

HERACLES.

And he concealed it! Wherefore did ye set
This cheer before me? Wherefore let me enter?

SERVANT.

'Twas my lord's will, and his regard for thee.

HERACLES.

Unhappy man, of what a wife bereft!

SERVANT.

Ah! we are all undone, not he alone.

HERACLES.

Fool that I am! I knew it when I saw
The trouble of Admetus and his tears,
The house in mourning, the attendants dumb,
And with an idle tale I let him cloak
The promptings of my senses, entering in,
And drinking in this house where she lay dead—
Dead, and this night! O mirth most horrible!
And do I wreathe my brow and revel still?

[*Throws down his garland.*

Oh, 'twas ill done, kind friend, to hold thy peace
And hide this sorrow—'twas a cruel kindness!
Where is this burial hence? Where shall I find her?

SERVANT.

Beyond the city, by the road which leads
Straight to Larissa—thou wilt find her tomb
By the wayside; 'tis there our kings are laid.

HERACLES.

O heart! O soul! who never failed me yet,
Though oft in stress of danger sore bestead,
Now show thy mettle worthy of the son
Tirynthian Alcmena bare to Zeus.

The combat now is set, the foe is Death;
For I must save this woman, though my life
Be forfeit, and restore her to her lord.
Let this atone me and requite his care.
Now pale the stars, and the first flush of dawn
Purples the east: it is the time when he,
The sable-mantled monarch, scents afar
The fresh blood offerings, and among the tombs
Steals forth to taste them. There, methinks, I'll find him;
And once within the circle of these arms,
He will be glad enough to yield his prize.
But should he come not, where methinks he will,
Down to the sunless mansions of the dead
I'll make my way; to sad Persephone,
Thronèd in gloom beside her dusky lord;
To them I'll make my prayer, till I prevail,
And bring Alcestis to these halls again.

Rushes out. Thunder is heard. The SERVANT *covers his face.*

SCENE III.

The SERVANT *alone.*

SERVANT.

Alcmena's son, the heaven-born Heracles!
And this his omen!
Oh, if a slave may lift his hands in prayer,
Grant us, great Zeus, a saviour from these ills;
I know not how, but, if it be thy will,
Some help may come!

The light grows, and the sound of cattle bells and herdsmen's voices are heard.

The morning breaks; already to the hills
The herdsmen lead the flocks. Soon to the house
My lord will be returning. I must haste,
And take these in.

[*Removing the wine-cups, &c.*

If he should see these here!

[*Looking at the Palace.*

Ah, master, what a coming back is thine!

[*Exit.*

SCENE IV.

ADMETUS, CHORUS.

The stage is empty for a short time, during which the sun rises, and the sound of the cattle bells dies away up the hills. Enter ADMETUS, *returning from the burial, followed by* CHORUS, ATTENDANTS, *&c.*

ADMETUS.

Oh! . . . Oh! how I loathe this entering in!
Is this your kindness?
[*Pointing to the Palace.*
Why did ye restrain
My purpose at the tomb to hurl me in,
That death might have us both, and there an end?
Oh, that above my head that earth were lying,
Deep, trodden down, that I were blotted out
In darkness mountainous and heapèd high,
As is my grief—my grief, aye, and my shame—
To let her die! My wife! My lovely bride!
How can I live? How can I live?

CHORUS.

Go in,
This fate must be endured. Thou hast thy life;
Be comforted in this.

ADMETUS.

Ah, woe is me!

CHORUS.

Through anguish hast thou gone, full well I know,
But tears will not avail.

ADMETUS.

O house of mine,
How shall I enter thee? How can I live
Within thy chambers, where each stone will keep
Her memory, and, should I call her name,
In brief forgetfulness, will give it back,
To mock me with it? There, where she would sit,
Must I sit widowed, or with what dark dwellers!—
Ear-haunting silence, peering solitudes,
And that abhorred intrusion, vain Regret,
Mumbling the past, and telling o'er and o'er
The *miserere* of its might-have-been—

These my companions!
Alone, my people cursed, hating my parents,
A speech, a rumour, in the mouths of men—
The man who dared not die!—Ah, what is this?
A word—some turn of action past recall—
Must this whole fabric of what seemed our lives
Crumble beneath us?—Oh, why are we born?
The sport of fate, the wreckage on the shores
Of its blind, driven tides!—I had no thought,
I knew no haven but that one which mocked—
I know it now—my vision with a dream
Of happiness and peace—she, whom I loved,
Still with me, as when, on a morn like this,
As bright, as fair, I led her home my bride.
And ye, my friends,—

[*They weep.*

Ah! ye remember it—
Ye praised her beauty, and ye bid us joy.
A coming home—and now! Ye gods, and now!

Sits, and covers his face with his hands. A few bars of music may be played, and the leader of the CHORUS *comes to the front of the stage.*

CHORUS.

This is the lot of man. We hold our lives
Under encumbrance to some destiny,
Whose ends we see not. Of what whole the part,
Moved or self-moving, blind or purposeful,
Asking, we hear no answer but the sound
Of old contentions, echoing through the void
Which rounds our lives about. This hath no lore
Or system sounded. In these heights the flame
Of song sinks baffled. This is that dread power,
Owning no altar, worshipped at no shrine,
Wrought in no substance but the bleeding heart
It presses quivering in its iron hold—
Necessity!
Oh, if my numbered days,
Not without reverence, have brought their tale
To the near close, come not, O goddess dread,
With heavier hand upon me than erewhile!

[*Steps back.*

My lord, bethink thee that, in this affliction,
Thou standest not alone, though in rude measure,
After prosperity, it comes upon thee.

Tears will avail not to bring back the dead.
Loved in her life, her memory remains
A glory to the earth, and for our children
A dear inheritance. In this take comfort.
Thus from thy loss comes gain, and, for that loss,
Time surely will assuage it.

ADMETUS.

Time, aye, time
To love and lose! This is the end of all.
Living and loving, we but furnish forth
A pageant streaming onwards to the grave.
Why should we wed? Why should we get us children?
Unwed and childless, we at least may set
A term to sorrow. But, by hope beguiled,
And nature's seeming-sweet entanglements,
Binding our lives with others, we but build
New entrances for grief. Had I ne'er wed,
I had not suffered.

An aged MAN *of the* CHORUS *steps forward.*

OLD MAN.

Hear an old man speak.
My son—for sorrow gives to age this leave,
Though king, to call thee—let my years commend
Some comfort from my speech. Full well I know
The bursting flood of sorrow, at the breach
And torrent of its onset, wildly comes.
But, as the stream with the broad river mingling,
The river with the sea, its clamorous heights
Sink, spreading through the channels of the world.
I once was young, once I too loved and lost
A loving wife, and life seemed but a waste,
Made wide to entertain the sad guest, grief.
But children, pledges of that few years' love,
Friends, and the harder uses of the world,
With healing time, brought comfort, and the pain,
I had thought endless, grew into a peace
And quiet recollection, which shall bring
My steps, Heaven willing, calmly to the end.
What waits us there I know not, but perchance
The gods require our suffering. Prythee take
An old man's thought in kindness, kindly meant.

ADMETUS.

Kind friend, I thank thee, and I thank you all;
Your words are welcome—but I count the dead
More blessed . . .

[*He makes a movement to enter the Palace.*

at rest . . . at rest . . .

[*He stops, overcome.*

The grouping here may be supposed to be as follows: ADMETUS *on the left, in the act of ascending the steps of the Palace, leans his head on his arm at the foot of a statue or vase hung with a black scarf. The* CHORUS *are on the right, the* OLD MAN, *who has just spoken, nearest to* ADMETUS, *leaning on his staff. Nearer to the audience the* LEADER OF THE CHORUS *stands looking up as in contemplation. At this point enter* HERACLES, *right, leading in with him* ALCESTIS, *completely veiled, followed by* PEOPLE *of the city.*

SCENE V.

The same, HERACLES, ALCESTIS.

HERACLES.

Admetus . . .

Admetus . . .

ADMETUS.

Ah, my guest, I had forgot . . .

But what is this? [*Starts at seeing the veiled figure.*

HERACLES.

Admetus, to a friend

A friend should speak his mind. I will not blame thee,
Knowing thy sorrow, and what grief has come
Upon thy house; nay, rather do I blame
My own inconstancy, and that I yielded
My purpose to a tale—'twas not well done.

ADMETUS.

Ah, friend, forgive me, but to let thee go
Was to add pain to grief.

HERACLES.

Nay, but bethink thee,
I took thy cheer and revelled in these halls,
And then, and then I heard—but that is passed;
I know thy kindness—thou shalt do me yet
A service, one more welcome to thy friend.
Bound on this Thracian labour, I would leave
Here, in thy charge, this woman, and if aught
Should there befall me, keep her in thy house
For a friend's sake. 'Twas as a prize I won her,
With no small toil—a contest that was set
For games and wrestling, passing which I claimed
To enter in the lists for this fair prize;
And won her, as thou seest. So, as I say,
Receive her in thy charge, and thou mayest live
To thank me for her.

ADMETUS.

Never must thou think,
O prince, to slight thee, that I told thee not
My sorrow, or the woe which on my house
Has fallen; 'twas that, as I said just now,
I could not see thee go. But, for this service,

If it be possible, I pray thee lead
The maid elsewhere. Bid some Thessalian friend—
For thou hast others—one who has not suffered
As I have, take her. Oh, remind me not
Of my misfortune, for, to see her here,
I could not bear it, and my head is bowed
Enough by grief. How could a tender maid—
For such her form and vesture show her—dwell
Within these halls alone? Or to my bed
Am I to take her, false and faithless found
To my dead wife? Oh, never! Spare me that!
And thou too, lady, whosoe'er thou art,
Bringest before mine eyes the very form
Of my Alcestis. Take from my sight this maiden,
I do conjure thee. Slay me not again!
For now in her I seem to see once more
My wife—ah, me!—my heart is darkly troubled.
Now do I taste indeed the bitterness
Of this my grief.

HERACLES.

Would that I had the power
From the dark realms of death to bring again

Thy wife, such service from me mightst thou have.

ADMETUS.

Right well I know it, but this may not be;
The dead return not.

HERACLES.

From the realms below
Since they return not, it behoves thee bear
Thy grief with moderation, and in this
To prove the man within thee.

ADMETUS.

Sayest thou well?
Yet there are sufferings too hard for counsel;
And such is this.

HERACLES.

But wilt thou mourn for ever,
Give grief the rein, and pass thy life in tears?
Surely the time may come when a new marriage
Shall stay thy sorrow?

ADMETUS.

Peace! what word were this?
Oh, speak not of it!

HERACLES.

Ah, well! Take, at least,
This maid beneath the shelter of thy house.
This wrongs thee not.

ADMETUS.

By Zeus, thy sire, I beg thee
Spare me in this!

HERACLES.

Nay, thou canst not refuse
So light a favour—though 'tis something near
My heart, and, under heaven, thou mayest yet
Thank me for this.

ADMETUS.

If I may not refuse thee,
Loth as I am, my servants here may take her.

HERACLES.

Not so; I'll trust her to no hand but thine.

ADMETUS.

I cannot—nay, I will not—take her hence—
Or, lead her in thyself, if so thou must.

HERACLES.

Give me thy hand. Thus—

He places the hand of ALCESTIS *in the hand of* ADMETUS.

And now lead her in.

ADMETUS. *Trembling and with averted eyes.*

I needs must yield, for thou constrainest me
Forth from my will in this.

HERACLES.

Thou hast her?

ADMETUS.

Aye.

HERACLES. *Removes the veil.*

Then keep her safely, and in days to come
Thou wilt confess that, in the son of Zeus,
Thou entertain'dst a guest of no mean worth.

ADMETUS, *having turned and recognized* ALCESTIS, *starts back in fear and amazement, covering his face with his hands.*

Nay, look upon her, mark her features well;

And, if they bear the likeness of thy wife,
Own thyself blessed, and cease from sorrowing.

ADMETUS.

Ye gods! what do I see? beyond all hope,
A marvel! 'Tis my wife, my own true wife;
Or is't some sweet delusion sent from heaven,
To make me mad?

HERACLES.

Nay, nay, 'tis thine own wife
Thou seest here.

ADMETUS.

May I then speak to her,
And touch her, as my living wife indeed?

HERACLES.

Ay, that thou mayest. 'Tis she, thy heart's desire.

ADMETUS.

Touches her hand and, reassured, falls on his knees and presses it to his lips.

My wife!

HERACLES.

Aye, 'tis thy wife, and may the joy
Thou hast, escape the envy of the gods!

ADMETUS. *Rising and releasing her hand.*

My wife, O heavens! past hope, beyond recall,
I had thought hence!

[*To* HERACLES.

How didst thou bring her back?

HERACLES.

A prize, I won her from the arms of Death.
'Twas, as I said, a prize; and at the tomb
I rushed upon him, as he came to taste
The poured blood offerings.

ADMETUS.

But why stands she thus
Speechless?

HERACLES.

It is not lawful that she speak,
Till the third day be spent, and cleansing rites

Are duly done, for there has passed upon her
The breath of the dead world. Lead her now in.

ALCESTIS *makes a movement towards* ADMETUS, *who leads her up the steps of the Palace. Before going up he turns to* HERACLES.

ADMETUS.

Oh, stay with us and be our welcome guest.

HERACLES.

I may not now. Another contest calls,
And I must hasten. Fare ye well—Farewell!

ADMETUS.

Farewell, and Heaven go with thee, best of friends!

[*Exit* HERACLES *amid acclamations.*

On the terrace of the Palace, holding his wife's hand.

And now, ye people, let the song of joy
Sound through our city, and a time be set
For praise and due thanksgiving to the gods.
Now am I blessed, now do I know indeed
At last my happiness.

CHORUS.

Thus from our ills
Doth Heaven bring good. Thus on our night of gloom
Hath dawned a day of joy. Oh, be it mine
To keep my steps in reverence, and to see
In all my ways the guiding hand of Heaven!

To ADMETUS *and* ALCESTIS.

Hail! and all joy go with ye!

ADMETUS *leads* ALCESTIS *to the doorway of the Palace, where he turns and again presents her to the people. A March—acclamations.*

CURTAIN.

THE END.

OXFORD: HORACE HART
PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

205 5 560

AUG 21 1969